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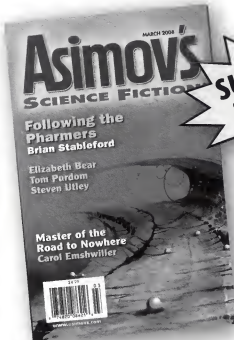
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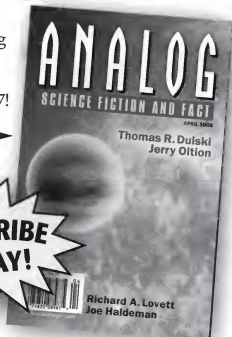
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Well, here we are, celebrating the 31<sup>st</sup> anniversary of *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine. This milestone may not be as exciting as the 30<sup>th</sup>. It would probably be harder to mark the occasion with an anthology similar to last year's successful *30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Anthology* (still available at **Amazon.com**, by the way). No collection of editorials from the magazine's past editors grace this issue. Robert Silverberg hasn't marked the occasion with a special Reflections column, and, while we have a terrific lineup of stories, we haven't asked each of the authors to reminisce about his or her history with *Asimov's*.

Still, the significance of thirty-one years of publication impressed me this summer while reading through *Worlds of If: A Retrospective Anthology* edited by Frederik Pohl, Martin Harry Greenberg, and Joseph D. Olander, and published by Bluejay Books in 1986. *If* and its companion magazine, *Galaxy*, were two of the SF magazines I grew up on. *If*, which first came out in March 1952, ceased regular publication after December 1974 when it was incorporated into *Galaxy*. *Galaxy*, which began about a year and a half earlier in October 1950, made it through thirty years, with one issue out in 1980—its thirty-first year—before it, too, ceased regular publication.

Legendary editors who worked at one or both of these magazines include H.L. Gold, Damon Knight, Frederik Pohl, and James Baen. The breathtaking list of authors whose stories appeared in these magazines include Philip K. Dick,

Cordwainer Smith, Poul Anderson, Frederik Pohl, Isaac Asimov, R.A. Lafferty, Larry Niven, Harlan Ellison, Samuel R. Delany, Philip José Farmer, Robert Silverberg, James Tiptree, Jr., Theodore Sturgeon, and Clifford D. Simak. I don't suppose it's surprising that each of these authors also has a place on the list of writers that formed the backbone of my teenaged reading and helped to create my earliest perceptions of what good SF writing was all about.

When I joined the staff of *Asimov's* in 1982, the magazine was at the close of its sixth year. While *If* had made it through 175 issues and *Galaxy* to 254, *Asimov's* was on its 56<sup>th</sup>. *If* and *Galaxy's* numbers and years of publication seemed like noble goals to aspire to, but they were hardly within reach. We were closing in, though, on some historic pulp magazines that surely must have influenced the formative years of many of the *If* and *Galaxy* authors. In numbers of issues, we had already passed *Super Science Stories* 1940-1951 (31 issues), and were in striking distance of *Planet Stories* 1939-1955 (71 issues) and *Startling Stories* 1944-1955 (99 issues), whose respectable runs had all ended before I was born. However, we had a long way to go before catching up with *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, another venerable magazine that began life as *Wonder Stories* in 1929 and which, like so many others, ended its run in 1955—nearly 27 years and 189 issues later.

But 25 intervening years have flown by, and, altogether, we've lovingly put out 357 separate physical

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issues (the whole number on our contents page is higher because all double issues count as two editorial issues). Somewhere along the way we passed *Imagination* (63 issues), *New Worlds* (201 magazine issues), *Omni* (201 print issues), and *Fantastic* (208 issues). Due to years on hiatus, we managed to catch up with *Weird Tales* (first published in 1923 and still going strong today at 340 issues). Even though it has ceased publication, it will be sometime before we come close to *Amazing Stories'* 609 issues that appeared between April 1926 and March 2005.

Of course, there are two magazines currently available that make nearly every other publication look like a slacker. *F&SF*, which will be celebrating its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary in a couple of years, is currently on its 666<sup>th</sup> issue, while *Analog/Astounding* dwarfs us all at 988 issues in 78 years. Now that we've been around over a third of *Analog's* lifetime and more than half *F&SF's*, we're not the new kid anymore, but we'll always be the kid sister to these two periodicals.

It's not uncommon in this field to find people pining for a past where there was little to no TV, SF rarely appeared in book form, role-playing and electronic games were a thing of the future, the Internet was beyond our imagination, and large numbers of people actually read SF magazines. We know there was a time when the circulation figures for all periodicals were far higher than they are today and the newsstands exploded with a profusion of genre magazines. It doesn't take much digging, though, to find that some of this perception of the SF magazines' glorious past is partly seen through the fog of memory.

While we are mostly aware of the long-term survivors, the graveyard

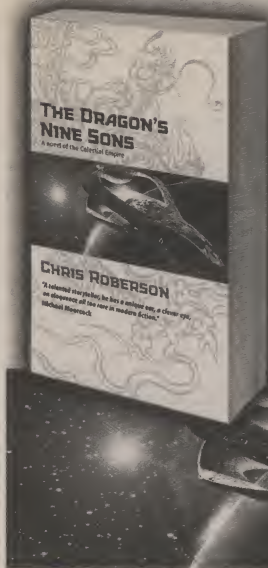
of science fiction magazines is filled with short-term reigns. Some, like the still deeply mourned *Unknown* (39 issues published between March 1939 and October 1943), found their lives ended unnaturally by wartime paper shortages. Others fell victim to newsstand distribution reorganizations and fiascos.

According to Mike Ashley's excellent historical documentation in his three-volume *Story of the Science Fiction Magazines*, even some of the longer-running magazines were filled with reprints or just published stories about one continuing character such as Ki-Gor, White Lord of the Jungle; Captain Future; Doc Savage; or The Girl from U.N.C.L.E. It may be that these magazines simply couldn't sustain the reader's interest after a certain point.

Whatever the reason for their demise, the vast majority of SF magazines, with wonderful sounding names like *Astonishing Stories* (1940-1943), *Destiny* (1950-1954), *Fantastic Universe* (1953-1960), and *Stirring Science Stories* (1941-1942), were unable to make it out of their first decade. While a large number of genre magazines may not hold sway on today's newsstands, those that can be found there, such as *Analog*, *F&SF*, *Interzone* (founded in 1982), and *Realms of Fantasy* (founded 1994), each have a long and rich publishing history. In addition, many exciting newer publishing outlets can be purchased through mail order or the Internet or are simply available as e-zines online.

When I look back at the illustrious history of *Galaxy* and so many other fine magazines, I find I'm very proud of each of *Asimov's* thirty-one years. We've been part of this field for a significant chunk of time, and look forward to contributing to its future as well. ○

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## REREADING STAPLEDON

Once again I'm revisiting classic SF novels that had a mighty effect on me when I first encountered them in the 1940s and 1950s, this time taking a new look at Olaf Stapledon's superman novel of 1936, *Odd John*. In an autobiographical essay I wrote forty years after I discovered it in 1947 or 1948 I had this to say of it:

[It is] the quintessential peculiar-little-boy book, a haunting and tragic tale of a child prodigy—one far beyond my own attainments, but with whom, nonetheless, I was easily able to identify. You are not alone, Stapledon was saying to me. You will find others of your sort; and if you are lucky you and your peers will withdraw to a safe island far from the cruel and clumsy bullies who clutter your classroom, and do your work in peace, whatever it may be. Even though it all ends badly for John and his friends, *Odd John* must be a powerfully comforting work for any bright, unhappy child. Certainly it was for me. I was unhappy because of my brightness; through Stapledon I saw a mode, fantastic though it might be, of escaping all of that into a more secure life. If it is a novel that also feeds paranoia, arrogance, and elitist fantasy, so be it. It made me feel better. I think I am not the only one who used it that way."

Stapledon's *Odd John* isn't just a very bright little boy who has trouble getting along with the slower-witted people around him, as I was sixty years ago: he's a mutant superman, a genetic freak. Maybe I could name all the English monarchs in order, but I was, at least, human. John is physically as well as mentally different from normal humans, a slender, spidery-looking boy with huge green eyes, a massive head, and strange woolly white hair—a member of a successor species, our replacements on Earth, *Homo superior*.

John and his fellow mutants remind me of the Second Men of Stapledon's earlier novel *Last and First Men*, which is, I think, the most stupendous vision of the far future ever conceived. The Second Men are said to have huge heads, large, finely shaped hands, and big jade-green eyes. Like John and his companions they are slow to reach physical maturity, but have greater life-spans than ours. But the Second Men don't appear in the world until ten million years from now; the mutants we meet in *Odd John* are already among us, and have been for hundreds of years. And there are other differences. The Second Men, for example, are physically gigantic; the mutants of *Odd John* are all slender, even flimsy in build.

The two books differ in technique. *Last and First Men* does without such fictional standbys as dialog, character, plot. It describes

the next two billion years in the dry, impersonal manner of a history text. ("Of the great practical uses to which the Sixteenth Men put their powers, only one need be mentioned as an example. They gained control of the movement of their planet. Early in their career, they were able, with the unlimited energy at their disposal, to direct it into a wider orbit. . . .") The whole book is like that, and it is not an easy thing to read if one is looking for the pleasures of conventional storytelling.

*Odd John*, though, is straightforwardly novelistic in form, and Stapledon makes it clear right away that he can handle conventional narrative technique as well as anybody else. Consider this elegant bit of foreshadowing on the very first page:

I knew almost nothing of the inner, the real John. To this day I know little but the amazing facts of his career. I know that he never walked till he was six, that before he was ten he committed several burglaries and killed a policeman, that at eighteen, when he still looked a young boy, he founded his preposterous colony in the South Seas, and that at twenty-three, in appearance but little altered, he outwitted the six warships that six Great Powers had sent to seize him. I know also how John and all his followers died.

Stapledon (1886-1950) was by profession a professor of philosophy, but he was well versed in the physical sciences as they were understood in his day. Nevertheless, I have some doubts about the scien-

tific assumptions behind *Odd John*. He would have us believe that the *Homo superior* mutation occurred more or less simultaneously among humans of widely varying races: John is English, but his companions include not only French and Russian superbeings and a Swede but also an Ethiopian, some Chinese, a Turk, a surprising number of Tibetans, and some others. The preponderance of Asians leads Stapledon to propose that the starting point for the mutation was somewhere in Central Asia, perhaps Mongolia, which is reasonable enough, but I don't see any genetic trail that could have led from the Asian steppes to France, Sweden, or England.

In any case, scientific developments since Stapledon's time lead me to doubt that *Homo superior* is going to emerge among us by way of spontaneous and random mutation, as *Homo sapiens* probably emerged among the precursor human species long ago. We, poor primitives though we would seem in John's eyes, already have the capacity for genetic screening of fetuses and a certain degree of prenatal genetic manipulation. Despite the present climate of political hostility to such things, I think the future will see a steadily increasing reliance on genetic enhancement of zygotes and prenatal destruction of sub-par fetuses, and the end result of that can only be the gradual emergence of *Homo superior* right out of *Homo sapiens* stock, not by random mutation but by deliberate design.

John, who sets himself apart from human morality like Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov, stands outside society and analyzes its flaws. To the extent that Stapledon con-



centrates on that, the book is as much social satire as it is a superman novel. An early chapter shows the pre-adolescent John cornering a supermarket magnate aboard a commuter train and demanding to know why he is so interested in making money, since plainly he already has more than enough. Poking at the befuddled capitalist as a *banderilla* harasses a bull at a bullfight, John hits him with Socratic thrusts straight out of the socialist property-is-theft play-book. ("Of course, you couldn't work properly unless you had reasonable comfort. And that means a big house and two cars, and furs and jewels for your wife, and first-class railway fares, and swank schools for your children. . . .")

In a later chapter called "The World's Plight," John offers explicit criticisms of modern human society—its xenophobia, its superstition, its irrational bellicosity. ("One of the main troubles of your unhappy species is that the best minds can go even farther astray than the second best. . . . That's what has been happening during the last few centuries. Swarms of the best minds have been leading the populace down blind alley after blind alley, and doing it with tremendous courage and resource. . . .")

How I felt about these passages when I was twelve, I can no longer accurately say; but I suspect I nodded sagely in agreement with all of them, the socialist critique of money-making as well as the attack on religiosity and militaristic nationalism. Socialism holds less appeal for me nowadays. But I see, as I could not have seen then, that *Odd John* was for Stapledon not just a romantic flight of the imagination, but a vehicle for his own political beliefs.

\* \* \*

What had the greatest impact on me then, surely, and still spoke to me in this latest rereading, was precisely that element of the fantastic that makes *Odd John* not just a novel about a very intelligent boy but a work of science fiction. In his early years John is shown merely as being very, very clever. He learns languages at a glance, designs wonderful gadgets, etc. Any high-IQ human might have done the same. But then, in chapter fifteen (out of twenty-two), we learn that John also has telepathic powers, then that some of the *Homo superior* folk are hundreds of years old, and then in the next chapter—a staggering moment, delivering the real SF *frisson*—John engages in telepathic conversation with a member of his species, an Egyptian born in 1512, who has been dead for thirty-five years and is casting his mind forward in time to make contact with others of his kind in the twentieth century. No longer is this just a novel of social criticism; it's an out-and-out fantastic romance. We know now that we are reading about the next version of the human race, not merely a high-performance version of the present species.

The sexual content of the book was something that caught my virginal eye back there in the 1940s. Science fiction was, and to some measure still is, pretty chaste stuff, constricted by pulp-magazine taboos. But Stapledon shows us the pre-pubescent John engaged in overt sexual events with a bovine young woman named Europa, which of course I, as a barely pubescent reader, found tremendously exciting. When that affair fizzles



out, John turns for incestuous sexual comfort to a person unnamed by Stapledon, but who surely must have been his mother, Pax (oddly enough, also described by Stapledon as bovine ("a great sluggish blonde. . . . Just a magnificent female animal. . . . Conversation with her was sometimes almost as one-sided as conversation with a cow.")

John also has a homosexual period—part of his experimental study of humanity, I suppose. As a non-homosexual boy living in an era not very tolerant of the gay life, I must have found that off-putting and puzzling. Still, homosexual activity in a science fiction novel back then was just about unknown, so

Stapledon ranks as a pioneer in that area.

As for the cataclysmic ending—the suicides of John and all the other supermen as the world closes in on them—I once thought it needlessly nihilistic, and implausible besides. But that was before the Jonestown debacle of thirty years ago, the Branch Davidian holocaust, and other such mass immolations of modern times.

All in all, a fascinating, compelling book. I think I'll go on soon to Stapledon's other masterpiece, *Last and First Men*, and see what a rereading of that will yield. O



"There's something we'll see only once in our lives."

# MEMORY DOG

Kathleen Ann Goonan

Kathleen Goonan is working on *This Shared Dream Called Earth*, a novel that hinges on the latest research about memory, as does "Memory Dog." Other recent short story appearances include tales in *The Starry Rift*, a YA anthology from Viking, and *Eclipse 1* from Night-Shade. The paperback edition of *In War Times* will be out soon from Tor. Kathy's web page is [www.goonan.com](http://www.goonan.com).

She is always busy and today the temperature is dropping. So she splits wood and I lie next to her, paws outstretched, belly on cold ground, panting breath outflowing, white. Memory huge and bleeding, not keeping to one track, mammalian but skipping, skipping.

She is ferocious with energy. She is mad. The chips fly everywhere and so do the split logs. Splinter, splinter, splinter: kindling. The insides of trees smell sweet; sharp.

Arnold Wentworth watches from his wheelchair at the window. She is not angry at him. We brought him here. It was an arduous journey. But my kind likes journeys. Their imperativeness pulls us, gives us purpose. We know we will find you, eventually. Take us for a ride, throw us out of the car and drive off. We will think you made a big mistake and make it home again.

Split and long crunch of log-fiber. She does not know me, but I know her. She used to be different, and I was too. I am her memory-device, but she has lost the key. This happened before our memories were beamed down to us; among us. Our thoughts, our feelings, re-edited and re-cut events—some true, some false, but all completely manipulative—emanate from the Allover Station in a constant flood. Some of us knew it was coming, or at least suspected, and took steps. The three of us in our strange symbiosis are immune, but we have to live out here, alone. People would notice. And there are those who want to find us.

A pale flare curves against gathering storm clouds. It comes from Evan's Ridge, which used to be a tourist town but which is now a rebel stronghold. They have a missile launcher hidden in a bread delivery truck—at least that's what Jake says. I even hear the small pop when the missile hits the floater, but she cannot; her senses are dimmer than mine.

I would not have guessed how many people just wanted, needed, an excuse to use weapons. Everything went to hell fast—overnight, it seemed, and everywhere. Individuals joyously got out their guns, knives, bombs,

and missiles. Nations happily suspended diplomatic relations and declared war. We are safe here, at least today. Elizabeth still believes she can change people, that Arthur's smacks can do that.

The worst memories, the deepest, most searing, and most universal, are inside a small, protective bubble. The bubble is inside of me.

She has no idea.

Perhaps I am loving this too much, watching her, being with her. Putting off what needs to be done. But I am in heaven.

I hear it before her, the low sound of the truck engine, the hiccup of the driver shifting gears, and jump up, stiff, growling. Alerted, she lowers her ax and stands waiting, wondering: is this the time? She picks up the pistol she left on the rock next to the chopping block. "Who is it, girl? Get him, Daisy!"

By now, I've recognized the sound of Jake's truck, relax, and run down the steep hidden road wagging my tail. Jake, a local farmer Elizabeth has known since she was a teenager, brings us supplies. Food, gasoline for the generator so we can save the propane in the big buried tank, and local news. Not regularly. The dead-end tree-hidden dirt road below us also goes to property he owns, so it is far more likely that the smoke from our woodstove would give us away than Jake's visits. But this has been a vacation hideaway for years, so we could be anyone. Jake understands the need for not revealing who we are.

I was cast off, taken for a ride, thrown out of the car, but I came back. I will always come back. I am a dog.

Rain strikes the leaves, making them shiver. Fall is almost over and they are few. By tomorrow, according to the weathernews that is so submerged in my brain that I no longer have to access it deliberately, the trees will be cloaked in ice.

Jake gone, Elizabeth continues to split wood, glancing at the sky nervously. Weather is just about the only kind of uncorrupted television information she can get now. The rest of television, a million stations, with no exaggeration, is sheer entertainment, even what they call the news. I call it the Allover Station because every station and all of the news is the same, essentially. The weight of Allover draws everyone in, together, the same way a hearth fire would. It is almost impossible to resist. It is so full of death and murder and pain that we take it for granted that this is the way of the world and nothing can be done.

They are wrong.

Truth comes in the form of newspods, released into the air, drawn hither and yon by the magnetic call of those who swallowed the black-market pill that gives them access to a million independent podders. They call these newspods smacks: you get smacked with the truth, every once in a while; the pod, an electromagnetic bundle of information, smacks your face—really, just a light caress—and then true news—if you believe the source—unfolds within you.

Arnold Wentworth was a smacker, one of the most well-known and respected. The smacks were in the air, tangible things, like seeds adrift in the wind, after we all knew that it was truthuseless on the airwaves. He

composed and sent smacks, and they were not the right smacks because they too often told the truth. He was Elizabeth's mentor, and her fury and her wit brought him here. Many people believed Arnold Wentworth—so many that he was considered to be a threat to the government and tortured. Millions of people worldwide took the Arnold Wentworth Pill, disseminated on the black market. All based on the deepest trust, and Arnold, over the years, had earned that trust.

Now only Elizabeth has Arnold's smack code. Only she can release his smacks.

I am a forbidden creature—or at least I would be in Allover. My brain is my entire body, every bit of it pressed into many functions at once, for I am a memory dog, the only one of my kind. I am adrift in places and thoughts that are not really here. *Here* is quickly baring branches, lake marsh behind with ice creeping across its surface, low gray sky and gray geese flying, honking, saying simply go, go, go, their amazing brains taken up by getting there, by magnetism. *Here* is the pile of supplies Jake deposited on the porch before driving away. *Here* is the strict chop of her ax, her low muttered "Fuck them all!" which issues as rhythmically as the downblow of the blade and its thunk into the block beneath the split log, fuck them all, thunk, fuck them all, thunk, fuck them all. The pile of split wood grows. The man watches from the window and I am thankful that I do not have his memories too, for they are hideous.

*Here* is free from feeling my own memories. Mostly.

I still know them, though. Knowing is a form of enormous selfishness.

I revel, for now, in knowing: Wendy. Jolly. Elizabeth.

And me: Mike. Sometimes I remember. My name is Mike.

Arnold may heal eventually. He cannot talk, not yet, but is beginning to. He had a stroke—a specially administered stroke. Tears well constantly and creep down his face and he cannot or does not bother to wipe them away.

I nudge his resting hands with my long nose from time to time and his hand sometimes stirs and rests on my head. I get little from him, but whatever I get is becoming stronger. Perhaps he is recovering. From her, I get electric anger, stabbing fury, the energy that still cannot be words. She moves quickly, bringing in armfuls of split wood and clonking them onto the pile next to the hot stove. It is too hot in here, but maybe it is good for Arnold. She hauls in the supplies, too, piling them up on the kitchen table, getting them in out of the rain.

She was not always so angry. She was in love with Arnold. She podded lyrically to him, and the pods, I know, unfolded within him, potent flowers of information, sharp and intense as her, and he could not help answering. After a year of this, he left his wife, and his wife reported him, out of jealousy and sadness, and the government came because of the truth of his pods and now we are left with what-once-was-Arnold.

I am memory. And memory is pain. But I was made strong enough to bear it. For I made myself. I—the self that knows myself—cannot get out of the bargain, the deep-being of my cells. Oh, I could be killed; I could die if injured. I cannot, though, knowingly cause injury to myself. I am like a

robot in this regard. I did this because I so often contemplated suicide, so often thought of the tree speeding toward me as I drove, or the wrists in the bathtub, or the gun in the drawer. This dance around oblivion tired me tremendously, but with a long-regarded plan, and then in an instant of strength and resolve, I did away with it.

Rain turns to snow outside. Elizabeth plays jazz on the radio, even as the Allover Station, behind her, fills the screen with silent written opinion-molding headlines and alerts. Right now we hear an Oscar Peterson piece. It is a special talent of mine, one I was pleased to retain: a jazz encyclopedia. I can tell who plays, instantly, who sings. The sounds are horizontal planes that slide across one another. Mostly they stay distinct, but sometimes, precisely, they intersect. With a dog's fine ears, augmented by songbird genes, I find my pleasure. It is not the only reason I stick with her, but it is a plus: jazz. The wood in the stove snaps and pops. We are a joyous popping rhythm laced with the anger that is always there, that makes her movements quick and impatient, that erodes her heart with anger-generated substances.

She wheels Arnold to the shower room and I pad along behind. I hope it's warm enough now, she says, and unbuttons his shirt, unbuckles his belt, slides off his clothes, tests the temperature of the water, and rolls him under it, wheelchair and all. Water draws his gray-black curly hair straight down his face, over his eyes. Her long, blonde, pulled-back hair holds beads of water in the fine tendrils around her face.

"Juh," he says. "Juh."

"Uh, huh," she says. "Good." But her face does not say good. I think he is trying to say the name of his first wife, Jane. He is saying more consonants now. "Guh." And then, his eyes shift and he looks right at me. "Muh."

Elizabeth twists off the taps and grabs a towel from a pile on a nearby chair. She rubs Arnold's hair. She lifts his chin and looks into his eyes, kisses him swiftly, sighs, and gets his shoulders. "Grab hold," she says and he obediently grasps the bar in front of him and pulls himself up, shaking, his pale skin sagging from his ribs, his chest hair white although he is only fifty. They made him old. She briskly dries his back, his buttocks, the backs of his legs, and plops a dry towel onto the wheelchair seat. "Okay." He gasps and falls back into his chair. She's dried his face, so the wet tracks are new tears. She is gentle; her anger abates when she touches him. I am glad for her; I am sad for her; I am simply a wraith of emotion, rising around her. I nudge her elbow; she pats my head absently.

After she dries and dresses him, he sits on the couch. He can sit up without falling over. Every day she makes him exercise, moves his limbs, tries to make him reach, or grip, or try to repeat sounds or words after her.

"Kuh," he says, slowly, drawing out the sound. "Kuuuuuh."

I lie on my side by the stove into which she has shoved her split logs. The television is on, tuned low. She thinks it helps Arnold. All that is on it is stuff, stuff, stuff. Lies that they call news, celebrities, murders, gossip. A low, growling sigh escapes me as I relax into the warmth.

I think of Arnold's first face, when they were colleagues, not lovers, and I was Elizabeth's husband. Are these my memories? Hers? Jolly's? I no longer know.

That is what is so wonderful.

It is getting too hot in the cabin. I scratch the door, she lets me out, and I lie on the porch, on guard.

Mist flows in and obscures some of the details. Everything is still there, behind the mist, like brilliant red and yellow maples on a far ridge. You know they are there, you just can't see them. Think of the cloud, with its wind-driven fringes, as beautiful. Think of your mind as weather. Think of your brain as a storm. Arnold is stuck in a storm, locked, unable to move.

Being a dog is a joyful thing.

First, way back when it was new, it was a memory pill. Yes, say it, memory *drug*. I worked on a lot of the original research. Initially for those who were terribly impaired, it was such a boon that its quick spread to the rest of the population could not be stopped. It was to help people with memory deficits, which is to say most people. And it was to help with useful memories: where did I put the car keys, what the hell is his name? However, it of course did not distinguish between users who were terrifically impaired and the rest of us. And, most importantly, it did not sort memories as to importance. It bypassed mechanisms that do such things. It turned up all the signals. So it became the drug of choice for anyone who could lay hands on it. The possible dangers were trumpeted by the press, but if you could enhance your doctoral, legal, or high-school pop-quiz performance, why not? It raised the bar for everyone. Real and counterfeit pills, injections, and patches were for sale in the third world and in the school parking lot.

The world was awash in memories.

They were all imperative. People wrote memoirs, previously the domain of those obsessed with the past, just to take the pressure off. The intense numinosity of memories caused constant reruns of one's life; memory overload became a common plea in traffic accidents. The memory of a grievous wrong sharpened and would not let the wronged one rest until it was avenged. One way or another, when we are stretched out of our previous shape, we jostle the status quo in ways we could not have predicted. So here we all went, our memories stretched and teeming with visual, audible replays, as if we were all schizophrenics, into a well-to-be-remembered future.

For some—writers, painters, musicians, those who dealt in emotions—the memory drug was a boon. It produced a heightening of affect. The present always led to the past; the past was therefore always present, layered and linked and resonant with longing, love, and resolution—or hate, revenge, plots laid and hatched and brought to fruition and the results lived with. And lived with. Inescapably. Christian churches, with their confession and absolution, experienced a resurgence. We were all evil, deeply evil, and could not forget it; we could only hand over the guilt to an almighty being. Or we remembered joyous, pagan interconnectedness with nature, danced in circles, and our minds floated into a golden ether

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of faeries, dwarves, witches, tree-gods, and druids. Whatever. I'm telling you, the whole thing was a godawful mess.

It was not all bad. Some learned to control their memories. The visual used pictures or objects to set off links of associations.

Meditation, emptying one's mind, became big. Our minds and memories tortured us. Forgetting was a blessing.

Many people had permanent memory-release modules implanted in their bodies, and some, like myself, were genetically engineered to produce the necessary enhancing chemicals.

I will never forget the whole of Elizabeth's being after Wendy, our three-year-old, died.

That, and my own grief, and Jolly's, is the key that I hold.

It really was my fault.

Because, Elizabeth screamed, after we came home from the hospital, gently ejected from the E.R. and then the chapel and then the lobby after Wendy was pronounced dead, I had taken too many memory drugs, too much of them, and could no longer pay attention to the simplest thing.

"Mike! You didn't even know she was out in the street!"

It was true.

I can see the various angles of Elizabeth's fury-stretched face, her anger-stunned eyes, her chest heaving as she gasps for breath, hear the hoarseness of her voice as it devolves into small shreds of sound. Her face is mottled red, like some pale, mineral-dappled stone, and her straight blonde hair is pasted onto her cheeks by tears. Her smell is of sweat too, sharp, one she has never had before. It tastes sour and unpleasant.

This grief is memory, and it is Jolly's memory, for our collie rushed out the front door after Wendy, tried to keep her from the road, the neighbor who was also running toward her at the time told us. When we got back from the hospital, Jolly ran to Elizabeth, emitting hoarse barks, licking the back of her hand, pawing at her leg, and then jumping up, planting her paws square on Elizabeth's chest, barking like fury right in her face until Elizabeth drew Jolly tightly to her and they both collapsed backwards onto a chair, Elizabeth crying, Jolly licking her face as she was never, never allowed to do, while I stood dumb and stunned and empty.

The next day, Jolly disappeared. We knew she was looking for Wendy, trying to find her and bring her back. As Elizabeth made funeral arrangements I walked the neighborhood, and later that night while Elizabeth sobbed I called "Jolly!" out the car window, driving slowly down nearby roads. I put up signs. The next morning, while I was walking into the dog pound, Elizabeth called my cell phone. "A man just found Jolly in a ditch next to Bartello Street. Down where it curves." Her voice was flat. She thought Jolly's death was my fault too. She was probably right. I was supposed to fix the fence. I hadn't.

I went and lifted Jolly from the ditch. He was stiff. I took him down the road to our vet's and asked that he be flash-frozen. They do this all the time at the vet's; people don't always have time to deal with their dead pets immediately. "Step back," he said, as he lifted Jolly's shrink-wrapped body into the open freezer, but I didn't and tears froze on my face.



I was not fit to be a person. I wasn't fit to be alive at all. Not any more. I shared Elizabeth's opinion in this matter.

After everything was done with, after we buried Wendy, after I realized that Elizabeth would never speak to me again and with good reason, I watched her take up with Arnold who was a good man, an exemplary man, a man dedicated to the good of humankind and not addicted to memory pills. You would never find him standing in a daze in his kitchen being perhaps his grandmother cutting carrots in a another high-ceilinged marble-tabled kitchen while his toddler wandered out the door. He was definitely not me.

I decided to become a dog.

I would doggedly survive. Perhaps at some point I could be of use to Elizabeth.

Oh, of course, the form and deep being of many creatures were inviting to me, as I contemplated. The long life and intelligence of elephants, of parrots. The interior brilliance of panthers, snow leopards, tigers. Yet I could have them all, in this form: the dog.

No mammal save the human kills itself. But there was no room for big cats, or elephants, where I was going to live: in this world of humans. Was it penance, of a sort? I cannot say I do not remember, for that is about all I do. But there are rooms I do not go into. I do not go into the room of Wendy. There is no understanding that room.

I admire Elizabeth. She lives in the room of Wendy. Still. That is her anger. I cannot get in the door, because I am Dog. Wendy, the true real room of Wendy, is in the smack I so carefully composed, encased in its protective bubble. I have locked myself out. If I went in the door I would kill myself. And that is something I cannot do. Understanding is in the hands of God and God does not exist. There are many logical conundrums on the threshold of Wendy's door, and, as a dog, I am free to not examine them.

It was not really much of a decision. I remember those days as great swaths of scent, of grief-smelling spring wind that Wendy would never again smell, the green rich sea-smell, fresh and mineral-damp when I lifted a handful of wet sand to my eyes to see what she had seen, translucent prisms of obsidian green, pure true brown, golden sharp-planed bits that dried and blew away before I could move, so perhaps I was already inclined to dog, thinking in dog-memories of overwhelming smell. I guess that somewhat distantly I was considering my options and I can see so much more clearly now what I was thinking, as I have said: the elephant; the cat. Animal seemed the only option: to change shape; to give misery a different vessel, a different shape in which to bounce its energy about, as if emotion were the straight geometry of billiards. On this day, I saw a dog running down the beach between a man and a woman. Their child ran with the dog and grabbed his long black tail. The dog twisted free, frolicked and leapt, and he seemed happy.

I craved the relief of what looked like simple happiness.

That afternoon I drove back from the beach, went to the big-mart, and

loaded up on dog food. Ellie Wills was in the next line; we all shop at the big-mart now, even for a gallon of milk.

"I thought your dog died." Then she looked aghast and embarrassed for an instant, remembering my greater loss.

I pretended not to see the look. "I'm thinking about getting another one."

"What kind?"

Huh. What kind. A dog-like dog. Wag, bark, happy.

"Another collie."

"Collies are stupid."

I'd never much liked Ellie Wills, but for an instant I purely loathed her. "No they're not," I said, bristling in advance for my future self, and for dear Jolly.

It was the right choice for various reasons. I wouldn't want to be a menace; collies are kind, not inclined to viciousness, and filled with love like me, bursting with love, with infinite flavors of regret.

I wiped my eyes. "I've got a cold."

"I know," she said. "I'm so sorry about Wendy. It's not your fault."

I reeled with memories not just of Wendy but of everything, everything, echoing into forever, and reached for the seventy-five-pound bag and hauled it onto the belt.

"Any coupons?" asked the check-out clerk.

Love has no pride.

I needed Elizabeth. She did not need me. She despised and hated me. She wished me dead. So when I left the note saying that I was leaving and that she should not try to find me I am sure she did not grieve. She was probably relieved.

There was penance, too, in my decision to become a dog. I had enough reason to feel guilty, certainly; enough for several men for several lifetimes, even without the weight of Wendy. Because of what we did to the snails, the mice. We transferred memories from one mouse to the other. Memories of how to run the maze. Then we killed them, casually, by the thousands. It was the job of a grad student, his or her choice about how to do it. But that was long before the drug, long before my addictive hypernesia, the opposite of amnesia: remembering everything; having, even, mental events that you think are memories but which are not.

Dr. Lorenzo, at first horrified, finally agreed after hearing my whole story, after knowing who I was and what I had done and why it was so necessary to me. I had read of her work for years in journals; we had spoken at the same international meetings. I offered myself as an experiment. There was no paper trail, none at all—so both of us knew that actually it was too subjective to be any kind of an experiment. It was a favor to me. For all she knew, she was murdering me, but I easily convinced her that otherwise I would kill myself anyway, because it was true.

It took me several months in the lab to distill the essence I was after. Almost all of us are able to feel grief and loss. But it is so painful and overwhelming that we soon become numb, in various degrees. Some of us can kill others without feeling any remorse. We can justify it. Others of us

are capable of causing pain on a large scale. We command armies and call it necessary and civilized.

What might change this?

Arnold Wentworth had his ideas.

I had mine.

Becoming a dog: I cohabited gently, slowly. The initial work took weeks. It was a matter of the cells remembering; deep memories, cross-species, the work of a brilliant memory-master, experimental and forbidden. And: remember: we could do specific. So from Jolly, frozen since her death, I got Jolly's Wendy, and Jolly's extreme grief. We could also do long-term change. We could fix an emotion, a vision, a scene, in long-term memory by precisely implanting specific molecules of one brain into the other.

In the early days of memory work, we learned how to change the neurostructure of mice in various ways. We took out genes or inserted them. We traced protein encoding; we traced the precise mechanisms by which long-term memories survive in the brain. By then, we were able to transfer exact memories—how to run the maze; what color symbolized an exit; what sound meant food—from one mouse to another. Behavior was then replicated without the experience needed by the first mouse to form the memory.

That was the dawn, years ago. There were many more steps to go, much more to learn, before we reached the final, complex product: me. The puppy had preparatory genetic work done; the infusion of identity structures—mine—distilled from a myriad of information Dr. Lorenzo retrieved from my human body. I am, perhaps, a precursor. Perhaps not. My reasons for becoming a dog are unique, and neither the process, as it stands now, nor the product, would be approved by any government.

The puppy, so new, welcomed me, not surprised, and our neurons intertwined quickly, for she was growing like all new things, swiftly, her brain branching and branching. I thought I could keep out of her way; I had no real wish to use her body in any way other than to be near Elizabeth. But it was inevitable that we become one.

It was just my way of driving into a tree.

I am happy with the results. I am always happy, now. I am a dog.

I had to learn to be a dog. At first it was awkward to have four legs, but then it was liberating. I surprisingly remembered what it was like to be human and a toddler, like Wendy, so low to the ground. As I tumbled along on four short legs, I remembered my own two short ones, the sense of growth and maturity I'd felt when finally I could balance on one leg, take the next step, then balance on that leg, and take the next step, instead of putting both feet on each step at the same time. In six months I had grown to be an almost-full-sized female collie, tricolored.

I was cast off, taken for a ride, thrown out of the car, for the wrong I did, for my deep negligence as a human, but I came back. But it was my own ride, and I will always come back, now. I am a dog.

One of Dr. Lorenzo's grad students released me near my old house, as agreed, though she hadn't a clue about anything. The student loved me.

She'd walked and fed me for weeks. She scratched behind my ears, patted my side heartily, called Dr. Lorenzo three times to make sure. "I can't just leave her here." Doglike, I loved the student so much that I wouldn't have minded staying with her, but she obeyed my previous instructions, sternly relayed by Dr. Lorenzo, and put me out eventually.

As you see, this was no remedy for my problem, as I had hoped. Already the minutiae of memory crowded round. But it was intimate memory, the memory of learning how to control one's own body, the second sensory explosion my own consciousness, my own identity, had experienced. My love of the world returned, and my guilt receded. For a time.

First, I walked doubtfully down the sidewalk. Next, I trotted, and then galloped, liquid memory, a mere outline of a dog, through which flowed images, smells, imperative, striking me fully in the brain, loudly, immediately, like a live symphony orchestra. The spring earth was thawing, rich and damp. I scrambled beneath the fence, using the same hole Jolly used to escape, which I ought to have boarded up but, assailed with too much memory, paradoxically forgot to do. I ran to the basement crawl space door, pushed away its rotted door, and bellied inside. I ripped through the industrial-strength plastic bag I'd wrapped the dog food in and crunched down on the brown, intensely delicious nuggets. Upstairs I heard Lester Young on the stereo, and Arnold. "What's for dinner?" he said.

What's for dinner? The bastard didn't even cook for her. I barked.

"What's that?" she said, and her voice thrilled me. A million instants like stars shot through me in the underhouse darkness: her.

I barked again, and ran around to the front door, squealing and jumping up onto the door. She opened it and laughed. "Look, Arnold. A collie!"

"I see."

She opened the door and let me in.

I ran to every corner, sniffing joyfully, whining and emitting small barks, smelling her and smelling Elizabeth and Wendy and Jolly and our whole lives. I smelled this that and the other thing. I was bursting with the joy and sadness of the past. I ran into every room—her office; mine; the kitchen, faster than fast, at four-legged dog-speed, scrabbling and twisting as if bringing a gazelle to ground. Elizabeth laughed hard, with great joy. I shook myself into a frenzy, wheeling and barking until Elizabeth grabbed me and said Hey, HEY. She looked into my eyes and for an instant I thought she knew.

But how could she?

"Someone's lost him," said Arnold. "We need to call the dog pound."

"Her. She doesn't have a collar."

"Someone will be looking for her. Dogs like this don't grow on trees."

No, we grow in labs.

I licked her face. I swallowed her memories.

A rumble arose in my chest and I transmuted it into a sharp bark. Elizabeth reached down, ruffled my head-fur, and I happily danced, all dog, threw in a few leaps. Elizabeth said, "She stays."

Arnold's scent was slightly sour. He smiled. "Whatever you want, honey." His eyes, when he looked at me, were irritated. I didn't care. He was not the boss.

She was.

Memory is anatomical change. Period. Neuronal change. Synaptic change.

Aplysia, a giant marine snail, has few brain cells, compared to mammals, and they are comparatively large. It was a good subject for early memory studies. It is a beautiful marine animal, its head arching up and around, topped by what looks like fronds of a stubby palm. However, it is usually ensconced in its shell, so you can't see all of that. It is a hermaphrodite.

Training creates actual anatomical changes.

Memory is physical.

I wanted to remember love. I wanted to remember Elizabeth and Wendy. I wanted to remember the extraordinary web of being in which I had lived, and because I did not know whether or not the experiences that you or I might call "bad"—the disappointments, the setbacks—might have contributed to the overall flavor of that being, like a wash of one pigment over another gives a watercolor depth or a pinch of spice gives a dish an indefinable flavor and because, let's face it, I was a memory addict, I wanted it all. All of it in the skull of a dog.

The heads of true collies are not pinched, and they are herding dogs, so their memories have to do with the big picture, and being bossy, and with speed, direction, and following complex signals. Their long, flowing coats are beautiful. I chose to be a female because I did not want to be reflexively aggressive.

Because I wanted to be like Jolly.

Lying at Elizabeth's feet, I knew I had made the right choice.

After they were in bed, that first night, I padded to the door of Wendy's room.

This was not the room of Wendy that is inside me, the room I made, the room I can't go into, the room full of pain. This was her real, lovely, physical room, frilly purple and green like she wanted. Moonlight stretched across the bed, washed the pillows. Rumble, her beloved teddy bear, lay there, stub arms outstretched, his black bead eyes facing the window.

I whined. I stretched out on my belly, put my chin on the floor.

I howled, and was surprised. I did not know I could howl. It was a truly mournful sound, a soul-releasing "Owooooo!"

"Goddammit!" Arnold's voice.

"Shhh. It's okay. Get back in bed."

I still had teeth; I could bite if I decided to do so. My growl was low, but sufficiently ferocious. When I heard Elizabeth's moans through the doorway (they did not bother to close the door) I could have shot through that doorway, leapt onto the bed, and torn out Arnold's throat. Rapid pictures filled my mind. Elizabeth's naked legs, parted for me.

I padded to the kitchen, tipped over the garbage can. "What's that?" I heard Elizabeth say, and then whatever Arnold did made her shriek with delight. I teased a trail of chicken bones and rotted vegetables across the kitchen floor and cracked the delicious bones between my teeth. Bacon grease drooled onto the rug beneath the dining room table.

Deeply satisfied, I trotted back to Wendy's room. Without pausing, I leapt onto her bed, curled up, took Rumble in my mouth, and fell asleep, my mind a train wreck, a bonfire, an amusement park, of memories. A slide show. I saw it all going one way, each snapshot: Elizabeth's slow joy at realizing our love, a lazy morning in a sunstruck St. Paul hotel room, her smile across the table at the diner the day she found out she was pregnant. Fast, flash, flash, flash.

Now I was going away. Seeing it all from the other side.

"We have to take her to the pound!" Arnold's voice was reedy when it rose. "She's ruined the rug. It's a very good rug, isn't it?" He sounded hopeful.

I was sitting rather far away, in the living room, half-behind a chair, trying to be small. Elizabeth was on her knees with some cleaner and paper towels. It was her grandmother's Oriental rug. "It's all right."

"I don't think so."

She looked up at him and said sharply, "It's my rug, Arnold, and it's all right."

A thrill shot through me.

I have two brains. My human brain is evenly distributed throughout my dog body, intertwined with everything else. It makes what we call thinking slow, since distances to be traveled are greater. This was a decision I made. I wanted to be able to control my body easily, and therefore the dog brain needed to be where it has been for hundreds of thousands of years. The dog brain is on tap. It is ready.

But where was I? *What* was I?

I was a religious experience. I was, and am, Awe of Elizabeth. I was able to lie next to her on the bed, feel her hand absently play with my fur as she read, which is something that my human self would never have felt again. I was, I *am*, the future I never would have had, I am life beyond death.

After a weak, "I don't want that dog in the bed," Arnold succumbed. "You don't want the dog in the bed, but I do," she replied, calmly, firmly, and leaving him with no doubt about his choices.

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We are in that heaven that all the saints so longed for and predicted, pens scratching across rough vellum in damp towers, heads bent beneath sputtering candles. Heat, ample light, plenty, near-infinite knowing. But man is still enemy to himself, and man still must find god within himself to go beyond the oppression; the killing. And first, he must find killing wrong. That seems to be a sticking point in some parts. What if, suddenly, we all simply could not kill. If it was impossible. Memory drugs might do this.

I left my grad students with a particular prototype. If everyone had it, if it became active all at once, all wars, all firing, all missiles, would stop. Men in bars, poised to cut during the Saturday Night Knife and Gun Club boys' night out would drop their knives. Women in the Air Force with a load of cluster bombs would overfly without pressing the button. Any death would be accidental, not intentional. No revenge.

How would we pass our time? How would we spend our money?

Oh, there were a million problems with this drug, no probability that it would be brought to production in my lifetime. It was just a dream, and there was just one dose, one infinitely expandable dose, which had never been tested. I distilled it into pure smack-quality intensity and kept it, then handed the information over to Juanita, the brightest and best, the most committed, the most feisty, the one who could muster the most money. The most likely to succeed.

I *did* have a plan . . . what was it?

The memory key. Yes. That's it. My dog self sometimes forgets.

When I remember Juanita, I feel hopeful. Glad.

But I am a dog. Gladness is my nature.

I found that I could read.

At first, it was slow going. Elizabeth had left the newspaper on the floor, open to the Sunday funnies. I tried lying down on top of the paper and looking at it between my paws, but I had to back up, and finally I stood and looked down at it. This was especially painful. I imagine that stroke patients might feel this way—the loss of an especially treasured skill.

But then, it came together! A sharp bark! I danced! It was just the brain-slowness, the long journey of the information—

"Look," said Arnold. "You'd think that silly dog could read."

Elizabeth glanced over and looked at me very thoughtfully. I reached down with my head, grasped the edge of the dry newspaper in my teeth, held the page down with my paw, and tore it in half. I am just a silly dog. What is printed on the paper means nothing to me.

"No!" she said, jumping up and grabbing the newspaper.

But she continued to look at me thoughtfully just the same.

Well, I no longer had to worry about such things. I was a dog.

Wendy, still, was everywhere in the house. I ran through it every morning as if a spell struck me; I sniffed frantically, disconsolate, while Arnold worked, composing his dangerous, seditious smacks, which said that the



government had been subverted by evil men and that we must all take action. His smacks were, and are, full of specificity; his research was superb. I know; I was quite aware of him before Wendy died; he was Elizabeth's colleague. Her smacks were quieter, but smoothly ferocious, with sharp, sudden legal barbs, like those of sea creatures, emerging to puncture arguments and positions. They really were two of a kind.

Occasionally he said lie down and be quiet, but didn't move from his chair, or even move his eyes from his screen.

That particular morning, Elizabeth was out, teaching. The house, with pale winter sunlight striping the dark wood floor, seemed empty; Arnold was invisible to me. I sensed that things were no longer all that good between Arnold and Elizabeth, but I didn't care. I was deeply happy just to be near her.

In the afternoon, I jumped up on Wendy's bed, took Rumble gently in my jaws, and stretched out, aching. Arnold came to the doorway and looked at me.

"You shit," he said. "You think I don't know what's possible? I'm working on it." As he walked away, shaking his head, he muttered, "But sometimes a dog is just a dog. Right? Right? Of course."

I'm a dog, I barked. I'm a dog, dog, dog.

"Shut up," he yelled, and went back into his office.

A few hours later, I heard him shout "God damn it!" He staggered from his office and leaned against the doorframe of Wendy's room. I rolled my eyes to look at him. He let loose with a sob, dropped his head into his hands, reeled, and walked away.

I ran to his side, curious, a dog, overwhelmed by his scent. His pure, political goodness engulfed me. How did this smell? Oddly, like the ocean. Several kinds of sea. An openness. This apparently did not translate into personal openness—he was jealous of a dog, and that stunk—but he was famous for this sea-goodness, and for the sheer efficaciousness of his sea-wrath, a pounding ceaseless wave of good sense he released daily from relayed locations, helping to keep people open-minded. In a world where we could choose to become dogs, we could quite easily be made into dogs without choosing. Right?

Right. And that was just a small taste of the nasty possibilities. So he was quite necessary.

He also emanated the scent of something-bad-has-happened: worry, defeat, fear.

I returned to the bed, jumped onto it, and bit down tightly on Rumble.

Elizabeth came home flushed and angry. "You wouldn't believe what they've done!" She slammed the door behind her.

I dashed to her, danced around—carefully, so carefully, not jumping up. She crouched down, hugged me. She was crying. "They let me go! Fired me! I have tenure, but . . . Oh, hell!"

Then Arnold was there pulling her away, up, giving her a long, tall hug, saying, "I know, honey, I know. Look, we have to get out of here. I've been packing. It's my fault. It's me."



After I crawled onto Wendy's bed, I rested my head on Rumble, who was very damp.

It was not Elizabeth's fault. It was not Arnold's fault. Every bad thing in the world was my fault. My memory fault. My memory addiction fault. But I would fix it.

Outside, the sky was raining hate. Small pictures of Arnold descended and popped, and neighborhood kids led the police to our house and they dragged him away. I realized that he had been in hiding. There would have been better places.

Elizabeth was magnificent, promising many specific forms of legal action, even when they threatened her too.

They did not take Elizabeth, which, I think, made her more angry. They only took Arnold, said that he was a traitor and that they did not need any further legal justification for taking him. They shoved him in a truck that had a government insignia on it and that was that.

We stood on the wintry stoop. The gray sky backgrounded darker gray trees, and the mundane houses of the neighborhoods, their yards yellow and brown, seemed the saddest place in the world.

My dogness kept back the surging memory of seeing Wendy lying on the street on a similar day. I was that strong, that much dog, my humaneness, my Mikeness, firmly tamped into my paws, the tip of my tail, my entrails. And I knew what she was thinking: Loss. Nothing but loss.

She collapsed onto the stoop, put her head in her hands, and cried. I pressed next to her, licked her salty tears. She put her arm around me.

I was sad for her. I was glad of the moment; deeply satisfied, and some yearning was settled, for just that tipping instant. Finally, I could be of some use to her, if only as a furry animal into which she could press her face, and sob, and hug me so tightly that my entire being rejoiced.

They were watching Elizabeth, of course, her information paths, with their computers, but she knew the triggers as she had defended clients against their prying. Besides, they have so many people to watch. She knew the back alleys to the back alleys, all the ways to make her searches innocuous, all the ways to subvert their attempts. And she found out where they took Arnold.

She talked to me, of course, all the time, told me everything she did and everything she planned to do. She forgot to eat, and became very thin, and ran twice a day, with me at her side, and got strong.

By that time, I knew that Arnold would never die, not for her. "He left an entire library of smacks," she said. "These people are so predictable. He said that tyrants always are. I'll only have to modify each one a bit to make it perfectly up-to-date when I release it."

They will know you are doing it, I barked. I barked straight at her, standing up, as if I were talking to her. I heard each word in my head as I barked. I thought of plans. I could tear out tiny newspaper words and assemble them for her. I could talk to her if I really wanted to.

No. *Mike* could talk to her. I knew quite well that she would throw Mike out of the house, onto the street. She would never let Mike back in.

She really could not suspect who I was. She was already puzzled at times.

She leaned back in her computer chair, tired and anxious. "They'll know it's me, of course. If they take me, I'll be of no use. But if I do nothing, I'm of goddamn little use either. Hell."

For three days, then, she packed. She went into the garage and got out all of our old camping and backpacking gear, our emergency flee-the-government food about which we laughed, but nervously, when we assembled it years ago. The smells of it all threw me into ecstasies of a million hikes. One year, we hiked the entire Appalachian Trail. When we started in Georgia, in the spring, red trilliums dotted the slopes of the mountains. Our tent smelled of Gore-Tex, a few steps removed from plastic, and as she unrolled it and set it up in the garage to see if it was still good I went inside, breathed deeply, and, if I could have, I would have cried. I curled up there on the sleeping bags she tossed into the door, enveloped in a deeply scented panacea of the past. The good times. Us.

"I know where he is," she said. "And the government is going down. It will be chaos. He won't be at all useful; he'll be killed. Here's the plan. Listening? Good dog. I've got an aunt with a cabin in the north Georgia mountains. Her name is Cecile. She's very old, hasn't gone there for years. But first, we have to get him."

Why? I thought. We don't need him. My traitor tail, though, thumped in agreement, ringing against a Coleman stove she'd shoved inside.

I wanted all of her, everything, just like I had when we'd met. I wanted that still, her first wagon ride, the day she'd fallen from the monkey bars and broken her arm, the feeling she'd had when she launched from Cove Mountain, into the wind, her arms in the hang gliding loops, moving the bar. When we met, we'd talked and talked, trying to get to that place where we would be one, the same person.

Where does memory reside? We do not know. It is a system, a process, a constant recreation. What accounts, then, for its specificity? I'd transfused blood from one white mouse to another, after giving them the memory drug. I watched the new mouse run the maze, which it had never before run, perfectly. Strange but true. All that information, so compact, just needing the medium into which to expand.

I was that medium, now. I was like water. Elizabeth and Jolly and Wendy were the folded Japanese paper flower that would unfold inside me.

She packed the truck, tied down everything beneath a tarp. The back seat of the truck was full of electrical equipment which might soon be useless. Cecile had a generator, and a huge buried propane tank, and when that was gone, that would be it.

Elizabeth took all the money she had in the bank, all the jewelry, odd things she thought might be useful for barter. One night she went next door and traded Mr. Monroe's license plates for ours. "He'll never notice," she said, bolting them onto the truck. She was ready to go get Arnold and head for the hills.

Inside the hollow garage, sounds were magnified. I heard the car come up the street and jumped to my feet. It was three in the morning.

"What is it, girl?" and then she froze too. "Shhhh." She held me tightly, and then held my mouth shut, too.

Footsteps, coming up the walk. A thump.

The car sounds receded down the street.

She hurried through the dark house, opened the front door.

It was Arnold, tossed like a package onto the doorstep. He was naked, bloody, bruised, curled up, moaning.

"Oh, no!" She tried to pick him up, but he was too heavy. She pulled him onto the hall rug, slammed the door. "Arnold! Arnold!"

He opened his eyes. They were empty. Except for the tears.

She had her mother's wheelchair and walker and all kinds of old folk equipment in the attic. She worked quickly, fury in every motion. From taking care of her mother, she knew how to position him, how to hoist him into the truck. When she was finished, his clothes were packed, he was wearing a diaper, wheelchair and walker were in the back of the truck. He stared straight ahead.

The last thing she put in the truck was Rumble. Slowly; sadly, almost as if she wanted to leave Rumble, leave Wendy, behind. She sighed and locked the house door. She said, "Come on, girl." I jumped into the truck, between her and Arnold, and sat up so I could see where we were going.

Everything seemed in order outside. The fast food chains were doing a brisk business; the parking lots at grocery stores were crowded, like before a blizzard, but there was no hysteria. Perhaps no one really understood how long this might last. It was a government coup—they against us. It was spreading, as if a virus had engulfed the entire world. Maybe it had, spread by Allover.

After we had driven for most of the day, she pulled off a narrow country road and lifted a portable podcaster from the back seat, tucked it beneath her arm. She thrashed through the woods for a few minutes, found a flat rock, set it up, and turned it on.

It is a magnetic thing, the podding; the smacks. It is a precise frequency, except that it is constantly changing in order to elude the government, and you swallow it, and it disseminates into your cells and stays there for a while. That's all. You are an antenna, constantly conducting a blisteringly fast search, and you get Arnold's new smack. Or whoever's. Arnold's, as I said, was by far the pill most swallowed. Internationally. He was the most true, most courageous. Most energetic.

The most dangerous.

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This setup would just help disguise the source.

She stood up straight and dusted off her hands. "There. They'll find it pretty soon—maybe. If they have time. It's kind of like a chain of bubbles, though. One will release several, and those will release several. Time-delayed. Some for years. Mike and I went to Czechoslovakia right after it was returned to independence, in 1989. There was a museum exhibit there of all of the lost years, the years during which they'd been allowed no news. It was called *Lest We Forget*. Well, this is my *Lest We Forget*."

My laugh, and my tears, were just a bark.

A slight snow spits outside the cabin. Elizabeth has made it cozy and warm for Arnold. It is too hot for me, but I would rather stay in here with people than go outside and be comfortable. I am a dog.

I lie on the couch so I can look over Elizabeth's shoulder while she works. She is in touch with a hacker.

"I think he's in the Netherlands," she says to Arnold. "His name is The Great and Powerful U. You, get it? All of us; one of us. But maybe U is a woman." She takes a sip of coffee and resumes her work.

All the hackers want to figure out a universal hack that will leave us bare to one strong message, one big smack. But what will that message be? Most hackers don't really care. They just want to open everything up. For them, it's a game, a challenge. For most people, it's the ultimate fear: mind control.

But U seems to be addicted to Arnold's smacks. She believes in him, in his messages of the importance of truth and transparency. Every day, U posts, somewhere, about the latest smack that Elizabeth has brought up-to-date and released.

What is the truth? I know what the truth is. Truth is loss, death, grief, and pain, and knowing the preciousness of each individual. Truth is living always on that edge. Truth is trying to prevent all that from happening. Humans have a special way of forgetting truth, of not thinking about what others might feel. Have I said it? Memory is physical.

Knowing can be changed.

I slowly lick the white top of my paw, straighten the curly fur into smooth lines, feel with my tongue the smack-bump inside. It is just a tiny bump, but it is powerful. It contains the essence of what I distilled in the lab.

My brain is storm.

Much later, when it is dark and Elizabeth is making dinner, I lie on the floor, still licking the smack-bump. It itches. In front of me is the local newspaper which Jake brought and which Elizabeth tossed onto the floor. There is news of local militias, an ad for hen-fresh eggs on Angle Ridge Road, obituaries. I move my head so I can see the next page.

"Mi," says Arnold. "Kuh."

I start, as if I've had an electric shock. My tongue pauses. My ears swivel. I turn my head to look at him. I can't help it.

I know that the weird expression on his face is a smile.

\* \* \*

How would he have known? I told you, his research network was astounding. He could find out anything he wanted to. He worked on many edges. Maybe he had a pod about what I'd done waiting in his library. He might even have tracked down Dr. Lorenzo, held her feet to the coals, forced her to talk.

It doesn't matter now.

I am asleep on the couch, but her sudden snort wakes me around one in the morning.

"Ha," she breathes. Her computer screen glows, the little keys are lit from within. The only other light is from the stove, where the fire flickers with soothing snaps. Arnold snores on the bed.

"U did it," she breathes. "She made the hack." Elizabeth starts the download. "Now, we've got them. Every fucking person in the world, no matter what kind of smack they usually get, no matter whose pill they've swallowed. And we've got to get to them first." She watches the screen, sighs. "Damn, this computer is slow."

It is dawn. I am on the porch. Elizabeth is inside, frantically modifying pods, as she does this time of day. Usually, we go for a long hike and put them in the relay in the woods. It is stupid and dangerous but she says that if she doesn't do this she might as well not be alive anyway.

Today is different, though. Today she has the hack.

Something—*something*—has me on my feet and drives my memories down to the tips of my paws, crushes them flat with the pure and absolute present.

My barks thunder and I am like an arrow running to the approaching vehicle. I meet it as it rounds the sharp bend at the top of the hill that keeps us hidden and leap to one side.

The soldier is alone in the jeep and surprised by me. There is no door on his jeep and I leap onto him, going for his throat.

He is yelling and I smell the cold metal of his pistol. I am a whirlwind but his other hand reaches the gun and draws. I bite his hand as the pistol goes off.

Elizabeth is on the porch, her shotgun raised. "Get away!" she yells and I know she means me but I cannot, I am a pure and total dog, with only a wisp of human somewhere.

She fires the rifle. He puts the jeep in reverse and flees.

And I know it's time.

"Are you all right?" She runs to me, hugs me. I ignore her. I am chewing, licking, gnawing. "Is it a bullet?"

No; the bullet went somewhere else, and it does not matter. It only makes a small sting, an ache.

She reaches into the bloody hole I gnawed and pulls out the blood-smeared bubble, a standard smack-storing bubble.

"A . . . smack?" She is stunned.

YES, I bark.

She stares at me, hard. "What are you?" She kicks me. "Some kind of spy?"

I run to the cabin, up the stairs; she follows. "They'll be coming soon. Arnold! Arnold! We have to leave! And Daisy . . ."

At the door, she whirls on me, still holding the rifle.

Arnold makes a grunting sound. Moves his arms. Makes a horrified face. I bark! Bark! Bark!

She looks back and forth between us. Arnold begins keening "hmmm hmmm hmmm hmmm . . ."

He can still kind of carry a tune. This is easy. The alphabet tune.

"All right then," she snaps. "Just one try. A? B? C? D? Oh, this is ridiculous!"

"Hmmm," hums Arnold. As always, tears creep down his face. I smell his ocean-openness, coming back. And then, with great difficulty, he roars, "Mi. Mi. MIKE."

I bark, I dance.

Yes, I say yes with all my dog-tools. I grab Rumble, toss him in the air. It takes a surprising amount of energy.

"MIKE?"

I brace for another kick, but she hugs me and begins to sob. "Mike? Mike! Oh my God." She steps back, looks at Arnold. "How is this possible? How do you know?" I can see her thinking then, thinking about all the things I'd done as a memory scientist.

I nudge her pocket. The smack.

She pulls out the bloody, protective bubble. Then she grabs a knife, sets the bubble on the table, and carefully slits it open.

Out it falls, the smack that I so carefully, lovingly made.

I cringe back, whine.

"What is it?"

It is something I cannot do, because I am a dog.

But I must. Again, I pick up Rumble, and this time just hold him in my jaws. Then I put him down and lick his face.

"Okay," she says heavily. "Okay. Something to do with Wendy." Her shoulders sag. "I'll do it." Her smile is wan and she is crying. "First. Wendy goes first."

She puts the smack I made into the sequence that she has prepared. The sequence is prefaced by U's hack. After a minute, the smack is ready. All she has to do is press a key to send it.

On the Allover Station, firing seems to have gotten heavier this morning. I am not sure why the local soldiers haven't come back. Perhaps there is too much disarray. The television says so. The long, grinding, universal violence is creeping upward, always upward.

A deep, low growl shakes the ground. I hear loud cracking sounds. Out the window, I see the tips of trees topple.

"Must be a tank," says Elizabeth. "The bastards."

"Tuh," says Arnold. "Tuh. Gu. Nnnn." He gestures toward the rifle. He is healing. The smack, I think, might hurry things along. I bark, loudly. Go! Go! Go!

She does it. She makes the smack, biological information now convert-

ed into electrical signals, rush down the wires at the speed of light and just as quickly is in the air, relaying, disseminating, *smacking*.

The tank slowly comes round the bend, ponderously slow, and stops fifty yards from the cabin. A gun on top rotates, adjusts straight at us.

"Fu!" yells Arnold.

And then—

The top opens and three men climb out. They hug each other, they are crying.

The same thing is happening on the Allover Station. A reporter is in some war-torn downtown where suddenly everyone looks around, bewildered. Two men fling down their rifles. The same look, of awful grief, comes over their faces. Tears flow. They grab one another, reel around.

The television reporter is weeping too. "What is going on?" she cries out in a parody of the reporter's false concern. "What is going on? Sir?" She shoves her microphone in someone's face. "Sir? How do you feel?"

"I," he gasps. "I—oh, my god." He falls to his knees.

Elizabeth grabs me, hard. "Wendy," she whispers. "It's Wendy. Oh, God, I remember, oh, my sweet baby."

All that grief and longing. Now everyone feels it. Everyone feels the loss of just one child.

Just one precious person.

But there is no revenge. No anger. Because this is not just our grief, not just Elizabeth's and mine distilled and refined and full of blame. It is Jolly's: pure, whole love and longing.

That smack, and its heavy burden, and the chemicals it was secreting, are gone. Gone from my blood. Mike is leaving too, ebbing away. It is good. It is as I planned.

I did not plan the bullet. But it doesn't matter. I am, of course, happy.

"My god!" Elizabeth gasps. She just stares at me, then falls and hugs me, hugs me, hugs me. "You GENIUS!" I glimpse for a brief instant a look of horror on her face as she draws back her hand, sticky with blood, before I close my eyes, deeply satisfied.

This exquisite grief, this unwillingness to kill, this respect for all others, may last for years, universally, making loss impossible, removing the numbness that most people live with and leaving them raw and open and kind, unable to hurt another human. Or someone like The Wonderful Wizard of U might hack it quickly, just for fun, and make everything as it was.

I no longer care.

I am a brilliance, like when the sun is on the water and you can't see into it. I am the brilliance of Elizabeth and of Wendy, and then I am golden grains of glad, glad sand, blowing in the wind, free of almost all memory.

All that is left is one little girl, who stands there on the beach.

"Jolly!" she calls, and claps her hands. "Jolly!"

I run to her. ○



# SLIDIN'

Neal Barrett, Jr.

Readers who have missed Neal Barrett, Jr.'s incredible style and story-telling genius will be glad to see he's back again. In the past, he's graced these pages with tales such as "Perpetuity Blues" (May 1987), "Stairs" (September 1988), "Cush" (November 1993), and the wondrous "Ginny Sweethips' Flying Circus" (February 1988). His new tale, "Slidin'" shows he's still uncertain about a perfect tomorrow . . .

"I can see it," says Ducie, "I can see it, Laureen. I can see it real good!" "You can't see nothing," I tell her, "there isn't anything to see, Ducie Jean. Get your pants on and hush!"

It's bad enough your baby sister's hopping 'round like a frog. Worse still she flat looks like one, ick-warts and all. 'Course, there's folks look worse than that. I got family it is hue-miliating to call 'em kin. Like ol' Jeb-Reb and Ducko Bill. Don't even talk about Grandpa Foot. 'Least Ducie's got a head, and just one, we can be thankful for that.

"Lau-reen, now leave her be," says Mattie Mom. "You know Ducie's got real good sight."

"Maybe so," I tell her. "But she don't see Dallis, Mom. Not unless she's got bye-noclars in those bug eyes of hers."

"Don't you say that," Mattie Mom says, lookin' round to see if other folks are listening in. Like they weren't more'n two, three hundred people in line, squashed in ahead and behind.

"Shoot, isn't like God didn't shit out Ugly all over Texass, Mom. Isn't anyone here don't look worse than Ducie Jean."

"Laureen!," Mom says, turning 'bout ten shades of red. "How can you say things like that?"

"Don't do any good to lie," I answer back, watching a girl with six tits, all of 'em biggern' mine.

Truth hurts, I say. But don't everything else?

We got up early, just before the sun come boiling up mad out of Lousy Anna, sucking up yesterday's sweat, and loosing a wave of morning farts along the line. A whole new stink comes rolling in to greet the day, and I'd gag and throw up, but you got to breathe to do that.

Some retard up front says, "Likely rain be comin' this afternoon. Kinda cool things off."



God's dick, I wonder where this bugger's been? Any little kid knows *that* date in school. It hasn't rained north of Wayco or anywhere *near* Dalis, Texass, in two-hundred-eighty-three years. Only, this pinhead's expecting pre-cipitation late this afternoon. Crap springs eternal, as Grandpa always says.

The afternoon didn't bring rain, but it did get us on past the Trinity Ditch where a river used to be. Everyone stopped, of course, it happens every time. You'd come to a dip in the dunes and there'd be another patch of petrified mud, shrunk up tight with a million little cracks in between. It's those cracks that got to us. Told us we were looking at a place where water used to be, water and trees, critters that aren't even here anymore, the way things were Back When. If you had a drop or two you were saving, you'd forget about later, and, without even thinking, drink it right there.

A couple of kids jumped down and started hopping from one patch of dry to the next, yelling and carrying on. Their daddy jerked 'em back quick, tanning their hides and giving 'em Willie-What-For. They were kids, and didn't know better, but the crowd sure did. Most everyone there swept two fingers cross their eyes to keep the devil away. Me too, though I don't believe in much of anything at all. Still, it's not good luck to get water riled up—even if it's where water's been.

Just 'fore dark we camped outside of Old Ferrus, up on a crest that looked down a pit deep as any you'd care to see.

"See-ment," said Uncle Jeb. "That's what they was diggin' for. Way Back When in—"

"—pre-hysterical times," finished Reb. "They built stuff with it, made con-kreet's, what they—"

"—did," said Jeb, "skycrappers, silos and such. You go to—

—any big city  
—still partly  
—intact  
—you're  
—gonna see where  
—cement's come  
—into play most  
—ever'where you  
—look ..."

Anyone tell you two heads is better'n one, they hadn't never listened to Jeb-Reb yakking away, going at it nose to nose, way into the goddamn night. Mattie Mom and me pushed Jeb-Reb's pedal-tater up near the little fire we'd built, and I got supper and water jugs out of my sack. When Jeb-Reb, Ducie, Mattie Mom and Grandpa Foot were settled in, the fire cracklin' good, I whipped out supper and waved it all around.

"Ta-da!" I said, makin' a real big show, "we got a treat tonight, folks. Sparrows-on-a-stick!"

"Aaaaah, Oooooh!" everybody said, as I passed the sticks around. Jeb-Reb clapped, one hand missing the other like it always did. Grandpa stomped himself good 'til he fell over flat.

Sometimes, kids in school make fun of me 'cause I'm kinda whole and they're not. It don't bother me. I beat 'em to the ground and they don't say nothing after that. You are what you are, like Mattie Mom says. There's no shame in having extra parts like Uncle Jeb-Reb, or not hardly any like Grandpa Foot.

"You can thank Ducie for supper tonight," I said. "She brought every one of these babies down *Zaaaap!* Just like that."

"We're proud," said Mattie Mom. "We surely are, Ducie Jean."

Ducie Jean blushed, a pretty awful shade of green. "I wish Ducko could've been here. He's real partial to bird."

"Ducie, your brother couldn't come with us, hon," Mom sighed, like she hadn't told Ducie a million times before. "Ducko don't breathe air like us. It's kinda hard to take him on a trip."

"Oh," said Ducie Jean. "I don't guess I knew that."

"Hard to imagine what else you don't know," I said.

"Laureen . . ." Mom gave me that look and I shut up quick. I'm a pretty tough kid, and tall for my age, but when your mother's nine-six you tend to kinda do as you're told.

A hot night breeze set a little wave of sand a'quiver and sent it rattling down the road. You could hear all the other folks up and down the line, talkin' real low, some of 'em snoring and rattling in their sleep.

"We'll be gettin' in late tomorrow night," Mom told us, when we'd gotten all quiet and settled in our sacks. "Now, you're going to see something not ever one gets to see, and I expect you to behave and do as you're told. This isn't no ordinary place we're going, I don't have to tell you that. It'd be something to tell your younguns 'bout. I mean, if you was going to have some, which, God help us, you're not."

"What's it going to look like, Mom," said Ducie, "what's it going to look like, huh! Huh!"

When Ducie gets excited, her skin starts sweatin' and the icks start a'poppin an' her voice goes '*Lubbuk! Lubuk!*' and Lord help any flies in the nearby vis-inity of Ducie Jean's tongue. Still, she's my semi-natural sister, and there's nothin' I can do about that.

"I could tell you," said Grandpa Foot, "but there's no way describing it, child. Not so's anyone would believe it. You can say it's like this or like that, and not come anyways close either time."

"That's not a whole lot of help, Grandpa," I said, the words popping out 'fore I could make them stop.

I've known Grandpa since I was borned, but every time he opens that ugly big toe the hair stands up on my head.

"Be right careful," he said. "Be right careful who you're talking to, child. You don't want them dreams coming back. I don't reckon you do."

Mattie Mom sucked in a breath. Even Ducie Jean got quiet.

"No, sir," I said. "I surely don't. I spoke when I oughta not to, Grandpa. It won't be happenin' again."

"Well, fine," said Grandpa. "You're a good girl, Laureen. I always said you was."

I didn't sleep good. I had me a dream, all right, but it wasn't wet and

nasty like the ones I get from Grandpa Foot. This was a dream I'd had before. There was dark and there was light, and the dark was good, warm and heavy like my blanket on a nice winter night. Then the light come in, all fierce and razor bright, and it gnashed and it slashed, and it swallowed up the dark and all the warm and the good inside. The world changed forever after that, and all the people in it. There was sorrow and sin, madness and blight, and nothing was ever the way it useta been.

That's the dream I had, the one I'd had before, and I never told it to a soul, not even Mattie Mom. If you're different like me, if you're cursed with Symmetry, there's things you'd best be keeping in your head.

After we were up and moving, it wasn't more'n an hour or so till we hit OLD THIRTY-FIVE. You could still see the road a'peeking through, where folks had wore the sand away. Ducie found a faded white stripe from Back When. Mom made her cover it quick 'fore anyone else could get a look. There's plenty of tales 'bout THIRTY-FIVE. Grandpa called it Death and Dessy-cation, whatever that is. Anyway, religion can rise up and kick you in the ass, and it's best to leave it be.

When we started up north, we hit a little rise and I looked up ahead and back south the way we'd come. There was folk as far as you could see—more than I'd ever seen before. The line seemed to wave, seemed to quiver, seemed to blur, as if it was changing, shifting into something different all the time. It wasn't, of course. That's what you call your opposite delusion, something seems like it is and isn't at the very same time. It looks that way 'cause folks are all twitching, jerking, quaking, and shaking, limbs going this way and that. Too many arms, not any at all, fingers a'sprouting out of ears, out of eyes, noses where privates ought to be. Legs stuck on where they shouldn't, asses up front and tummies in the back. That's how you know we all come from south of St. Atone, north of Big Salty where the Ugly Bomb hit Back When. Two hundred eighty-three years. The very exact same day the Raggys hit Dallis, or so the Book says. That's your co-accident's, what it is: Two big Yucks occurring at the very same time . . .

Do I mind being different, hardly like anyone at all? Sure I do. Symmetry's what you call it, like Grandpa says. Folks like me come along now and then. It isn't my fault and it isn't how you look, it's what you are inside. Uh-huh. Easy for a foot to say, old man, but I'm not about to tell him that. I got enough crazy dreams without him pokin' in.

We were getting close now. If you know what happened up here it isn't hard to tell. The ground gets harder where the sand's turned to glass, crunchin' and snapping where you walk. The sun slicks the earth, leaving long, silver cuts that burn your eyes. Getting toward noon, the blister-wind howled, splitting your flesh, sucking spit and grit.

"Guess you wish you'd stayed t'home, Laureen. Guess you're not all that big on seeing Dallis now."

See, that's what Grandpa Foot'd do. If there wasn't any trouble on the stove, he'd cook up a pot by hisself. I knew this was coming, knew pretty sure I'd open my yak and buy myself a woolly dream. Mattie Mom gave me a look, but it was too late for that.

"Now why in the world would you think so?" I said. "Figures I'd want to come, don't it, Grandpa? Wouldn't want to miss seein' Dallis, something near as peculiar as me . . ."

That tore it right there. I could feel the wet fuzzy slippin' in my head, laying there, waiting till the dark. I'd pay good like I always did, but this time I didn't mind at all. It was worth it to hear Jeb-Reb and Mattie Mom suck up a sackful of 'fraids. That, and a minute I'd never forget: Grandpa shook. The dirty gray mat that would've topped his head if he'd *had* one stirred like a bushel of snaykes. His toes all swelled and those awful black eyes tried to nail me to the ground. It was a terrible, frightening thing to see.

"Do whatever you like," I said. "I don't even care. I can't do more than a nightmare at a time."

"Maybe you can't, maybe you can. I got some doozies you haven't even thought of before."

I squatted down and looked right in his eyes:

"*Folks were different, then,*" I whispered, singing the old time song, "*Folks was all the same . . .*"

Grandpa near had a stompin' fit. "Shut her up. Shut her dirty mouth 'fore I do something real awful, Mattie!"

Mattie Mom unfolded a good seven feet, leaned down and gave him a look of plain sorrow I'd never seen before.

"I don't guess I can," she said. "I guess Laureen's growing into talking for herself from here on."

And then she bent down and looked at me. "And maybe someone be talkin' so much they're forgetting 'bout honor and respect for the family that brought her into this world. Maybe that's something she ought to be thinkin' at a time like this, Miss Laureen."

I don't guess I knew a person could be so full of love and anger at the very same time. There was things, right then, I'd never known about Mattie Mom before . . .

You could hear 'em coming, the hearing right behind the awesome quiet, silence running up and down the line, not a single heart thumping, not a whisper, not a fart. And then they was there, right up on us, sitting bright and shiny, sucking in the desert sun. I'd seen 'em once before, down near Lamp-asses when I was barely six. Too dumb to run, too scared to turn away, Mattie Mom right there swooping me up, hiding my face in the folds of her dress, not moving a foot, not giving a inch away.

You had to be scared, 'cause there's nothing as grand and fearsome as a Meckstex rider, sitting there spangles a' shining, ten feet high, his great hound sniffing at the ground, black nostrils flaring, big feet pawing at the glassy earth. If I'd a looked at Grandpa then I'd have seen his toes a'quiver, seen every hair shaking. I didn't have to turn to hear Ducie's awful croak, hear the pee begin to trickle down her leg. Only thing I *didn't* hear was Jeb-Reb yakking, and if that's not a wonder, I don't know what is.

"You come to see the marvel, yes?" The voice come hollow out behind the bright helm, a voice without a face that struck the heart of every living soul there.

"*This is why we've come,*" came the answer down the line. "*This is why we're here . . .*"

"You have come to see the cost of greed and lust, to look upon the tomb of awful pride, to gaze upon the shame of the world, to see for yourselves the tomb of the damned, the ruination of Man."

A groan rose up from the line, for we knew, as well as the Meckstex rider, the terrible words from the Book itself.

For a moment, there was deadly silence, only the creak of the great hounds' saddles, the scrape of steel against steel from the riders' heavy mail. There were six of them, six dark riders. Never more and never less. There might have been a dozen, a hundred, but never, could anyone recall, more than the six at any one time. Five, their armor streaked with black, scaled like beetles and hoppers and such. The leader colored red, red like clay, like rust, like the dull, blood-soil of the earth. And, as anyone knows, when the six were encountered, it was always the rider in red who spoke. Never, ever one of the five. Behind those helms these silent warriors might have been dead. And, givin' the way folks made up stuff they couldn't understand, most any fool'd tell you dead is what they was.

One of the great dogs snuffled at the ground, raising a cloud of foul air. The rider creaked and clanged, stretched in his saddle, bent real low, *then looked down at me.*

The hair stood straight up on my head. Something turned over in my belly and I knew, right then, I'd never again make fun of Ducie Jean when the pee started rollin' down her leg. In about half a second, that was going to be me.

"You," said the dark warrior, in a voice like gravel in a can, "you are of this family, you are their girl child, yes?"

"Yes, I'm th—"

Before I could get the words out, Mattie Mom was there, stretching up quick, between me and him, nearly as high as the Meckstex himself. "Yes, she's family, that's who she is," Mom said, "my girl child come out of my womb, like every true child I ever knew. I can't see your face, rider, for it's black as sin in there, so I can't say just who it is wants to know."

You could've heard the world die right then and I shut my eyes tight, waiting for Mattie Mom's guts to start spillin' on the ground. Waiting to see her blow up, see her go flying, see her vanish, see her catch on fire, waiting for her ashes to scatter on the air. When none of *that* happened, I waited for the blood-red rider to think of something awfuller than that.

"I've got respect for a mother's ire," the raider said, "I can live with that. But don't go an inch, don't go a gnat-hair further with me, old woman, for you're standing on the edge right now."

"Why, the edge is where I live, rider," Mattie Mom said, "where we all be living, 'case you didn't notice, sitting so *high* up there you can't rightly see what's crawlin' down below."

Something flashed, something glittered, something glowed behind the slit in the big golden helm, something old, something cold, like silver boiling from a star. I turned away fast, quick-quick-quick—but not before it found me, 'fore it held me in its grip, kissed the warm-warm between my thighs, turned, quick enough, 'fore it sucked my soul right out between my eyes.

Then, with a laugh, with a tortured cry from his fearsome mount, the rider was in upon us, his dog-beast flailing, thrashing, each great foot encased in clever iron spikes that defied the slick and glassy earth. The brutal thing struck, ravaged, tore at the ground, raising a deadly cloud, a fury of splintered glass all about. I heard them cry out—whine, whimper, beg for their lives: Ducie, Jeb-Reb, Grandpa Foot. And, though I hated myself for it, I cried out too. Everyone did.

Everyone, except for Mattie Mom.

Without a glance back, the leader jerked his horrid creature aside, kicked its shaggy sides and bounded off across the road, his soldiers on his heels. I could hear their laughter and curses as they echoed through their helms.

"Bastards, villains!" said Grandpa Foot. "Wretched, arrogant fellows all!"

"They are, indeed, a horrid—" said Jeb.

"—mean-spirited lot," Reb added,

"—brutes—"

"—cut-throats and—"

"—no good—"

"—bloody band of devils!"

"Well, that's so," said Mattie Mom, holding Ducie close to quiet her fears. "It's a terrible bunch, the Meckstexers be, but far worse still would be this land without 'em."

"Huh! A devil's bad enough," said Grandpa Foot. "There's no damn need he's got to act like he is!"

The night was peaceful enough, and the sky full of stars, and I lay there pretending I flew above them somehow, looking down on this blanket of lights, each a magical city spread below. My head began to swim with such thoughts and I soon grew dizzy and looked away.

I slept for a spell, but soon fell back into a dream, the dream I'd had before. Once more, I could sorta see the world the way it was in the Way Back When. Again, there was the bright and terrible light, then the darkness came and opened its terrible maw, and swallowed the light whole. The dream was real clear on that. The dark was forever, and the world and the people would never, ever be the same again.

Dawn seemed to fester, like the sun wasn't sure it'd bother going through it all again. Then, when the day finally came I prayed it'd turn and go away, for it struck the glassy earth with a vengeance, with its fierce uncaring fire, and it blistered the people with its heat, seared our eyes, and nearly struck us blind.

And, when we could see again, we gathered ourselves together as best we could, and climbed a steep ridge from the side road, back to THIRTY-FIVE. The ground this close to Dallis was near solid glass, now, and even the time-worn path we followed was rife with twisty turns and hidden slicks that took you off your feet and sent you falling back, bringing down the curses of those behind. Ducie carried Grandpa Foot, who muttered and squirmed all the way. Mattie Mom and me struggled and slipped



with Jeb-Reb's clumsy cart. And, for once, these two old bastards had the sense to know it wouldn't take a lot of sass for Mom and me to dump them and leave them on their own.

*Then we topped the ridge and there they were . . . just waiting, watching, patient and thoughtful as could be, every demon, every devil, every horror from a hundred hells below. Mattie Mom never said a thing, never warned us, never dropped a hint at what she knew we'd see . . .*

They lined each side of THIRTY-FIVE, near endless rows of gallows, pikes, cages and crosses, racks and stacks, terrible devices whose awful purpose was clear enough to see. And, such instruments and means so sly, so cunning and cruel they lay beyond the ken of ordinary folk, yet each designed to torture, kill, to slash and cut, to crush and sorely maim the soul within. And, adorning each awful presentation were creatures long dead, creatures yet alive, Rag-ohs, dopers, Popers and Yids, pale Baptistos and Arkansaw Blaks. Okiehoma Gooners, Lousy-Annie Slaks. Kanuks, Frangts, people on poles, people in sacks, people festooned with hairy rats.

It was just as Mattie Mom had said, the Meckstex Rangers were a fierce and wicked bunch, but it was them that kept us free, kept us clean of them that wasn't us, them that didn't belong. "With the good goes the bad," said Grandpa Foot," and who's to say which one's which."

Ducie cried, and buried her face in Mattie Mom's skirt. Grandpa muttered to himself. It wasn't till we'd climbed the slope and left these horrors far behind that Mattie Mom stopped and told us all to gather 'round.

"What you seen's the way the world is," she said, "and no way that's going to change. There's things have to be, and that's 'cause the way things was. You all understand what I'm saying? Yesterdays ain't ever out of sight. They're *lessons* is what they are. The Lord puts knowin' in our heads so we can do right next time instead of wrong. Wrong is what you're seeing now. Wrong's what we mustn't ever, ever think about doing again."

Mattie Mom paused, and looked at me and Ducie Jean. I didn't say a thing. Ducie looked like she always did. Like someone had turned the light out behind her bulgy eyes.

"You youngsters listen to your mother," said Grandpa Foot. "She's right as she can be."

"Right as rain," said Jeb.

"—Righter'n that, she be," said Reb.

"—Right and"

"—proper, Mattie Mom is"

"—couldn't have put it"

"—any better"

"my"

"—self, I couldn't."

"Thanks, Jeb-Reb," said Mattie Mom. "I appreciate your support, an' I knows the girls do too."

"HMMMMPH!" said Grandpa Foot.

We were getting close, now, no one had to tell me that. Not far ahead, the line had forked off to the left and the right, folks spilling over one an-



other in great half circles, pressing against one another for a look at what there was to see.

"It's Dallis, isn't it?" Mattie Mom didn't answer, just squeezed my hand tight.

Seemed like it took all day to really get up close. Three, four hours, maybe more'n that. The sun was harsh, and you couldn't even walk without kicking up slivers of glass.

We were so close now, we could start to see a sight that made the hairs climb right up on your head. The closer you got, the thicker they was—hundreds of 'em, maybe more than that, folks coming right at us, frozen in glass, just the way they was the very second the bomb hit Dallis in the Way Back When. Everyone's heard about Lot's Tots of course, but seeing them's something else again. Some of them was standing, one leg in the air, glassy arms swinging this way and that. Some was lyin' on the ground, still a'running fast as they could go. You could see how they was caught, their mouths, their eyes, their faces all twisted in one last awful moment before it hit 'em and turned 'em and froze them where they stood.

"Don't look in dead faces," Mattie Mom said, jerking me aside. Wasn't any use though—couldn't anyone turn away from that.

Mattie Mom wouldn't let go. She grabbed me in one hand and Ducie in the other, and pulled us through the crowd, making her way to the front. She pushed the last lookers aside

*And there we were and  
oh-Lord-God-in-Heaven save  
me! I thought for a minute I'd  
faint dead away—*

and Mattie Mom grabbed me and Ducie let out a wail.

It's just like Grandpa Foot said—there isn't no way to tell about it, it's something you gotta see, and even then you don't believe it's real . . .

*It's like a bowl, a bowl of smoky glass so big you can't see the other side. It takes in everything, everything there is, and so deep, deep, there isn't any bottom, just a great and terrible dark that dies and fades away, and the more I looked the more I wanted to see, the closer I wanted to be—*

"Best not to get real near, girl . . ."

Something grabbed me hard and I turned around quick, looked up and saw the Meckstex rider standing so close I could smell the heat of his armor.

"What you want," I said, "get away from me!" I looked for Mattie Mom, but she was busy holding on to Ducie Jean. The rider was tall, even afoot. He held the reins of his mount, and I looked away from its awful eyes.

"You read about Dallis in the Book," the man asked. "You know the story well?"

"Reading's just words. Seeing is somethin' else again. What—what you want with me!"

The rider shook his head. "The Book tells it clear, girl. Sin rose up from the East, and the West drew its swords and swept them back . . ."

"I can read," I told him. "I already know all that."

"Likely know more than you think, child. For the knowledge is in your blood. I knew that when I saw you."

"You don't know me. You never seen me before."

"I know what you are. I know your symmetry."

My heart nearly stopped. "I'm just like everyone else. Looking different don't mean a thing inside."

"... and that was the year of the Sun, and the East slept in defeat, and the West put its great swords aside ..."

"You got to tell me the whole Book? And keep that—*thing* on its leash. It scares the livin' daylights out of me."

"There are things you need to know. Listen to my words, girl—"

"No, you listen to me, rider!" Mattie Mom stepped right between us, tall as the man himself.

"You've no need to speak to my child. She don't need to hear anything from you!"

"She is indeed your child, woman. But truly, she is a child of us all."

I felt that chill crawling up my neck again. Mattie Mom drew herself up straight as she could be.

"Don't you even *think* such a thought as that. I know your kind. Folk know more'n you think we do."

"She is of your womb. But she is not the same."

Ducie whimpered, clutching the hem of Mom's skirt. The rider turned his hidden eyes upon her, and Ducie shrank back.

"She's *my* child, is who she is. And how she looks, she can't help that. There's others like her too."

"No. Not like her. There are others, but they are imperfect. She has the symmetry. She is cast in the mold. She—"

Mattie Mom's face went pale as ash. I felt her shudder, felt her body tense, and in that instant she reached out, jerked me roughly to her, but the rider read her clearly; he was fast, fast, his movement only a blur. He slammed me against his armored chest so hard I gasped for breath, saw bright stars swim before my eyes.

Mattie Mom loosed a terrible cry, a shriek, a moan, a sound that held all the grief in the world, and when I could see again she was shrinking, falling, falling away, then she was gone, and I was sliding, turning in a dizzy circle, down, down, down. I opened my mouth to scream and a mailed fist quickly covered my face.

"Stop that. There is no need for you to cry out, girl."

"God, you don't think so? Let me goddamn go, you hear? Let me go!"

I knew, somewhere inside my rattled brain, that wasn't a good idea, either. He held me tightly against his chest, but over his shoulder I could see the surface beneath us rushing by at a rapid pace. I thought I could see things, things down there below the cloudy glass, and I knew that couldn't be, that there was nothing down there, nothing at all to see.

"... It is written in the Book, child. The way things were, the way that things must be. Surely you can understand this is so."

I almost laughed through my fear. "What, I'm supposed to ride down this thing and we just—*die*, right? Tell me where it says that!"

"... and lo, the beaten foes slept, and when they woke they crawled out of the horror the West had left behind. And, though they had no Newks of their own, God had given them a great sea of sand, and from that sand they forged a—"

"I already *know* that," I shouted through the wind, "I'm slidin' down goddamn Dallis, I can see what they did." That was two hundred eighty-three years ago. *I* didn't do anything, what's that got to do with me?"

"It's all about you, child. All about you and the things that were and what has to be."

"You keep saying that. I don't want to hear it anymore!"

"It's about done now. There isn't much more."

"Don't. Don't you tell me that!"

I couldn't help myself. I tried to hold him close.

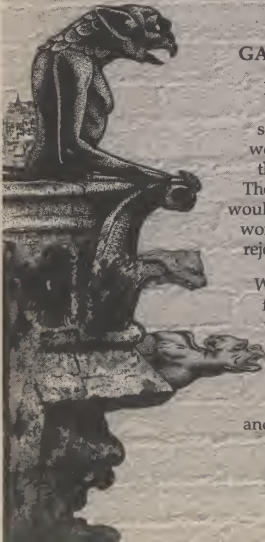
"I'll be there with you. That's what I'm supposed to do. And it *does* have to be, girl. You might breed, you know. And there can't be any more folks like they were before. There mustn't ever be."

I could scarcely see the sky anymore. There was nothing but the great bowl of glass, rushing by, and nothing but the fast approaching dark down below, and I *couldn't* look at that.

"What do you think it's like?" I asked the rider. "What do you think it'll be?"

"I don't know," he said. "Whatever there is, is. The way it has to be. Lo, the Book has said—"

"Goddamnit," I told him. "I already *knew* that!" ○



## GARGOYLE PEOPLE

If gargoyle people  
were the world,  
standards of beauty  
would be far different  
than they are today.  
The eye of the beholder  
would adore the grotesque,  
worship the malformed,  
rejoice in the appalling.

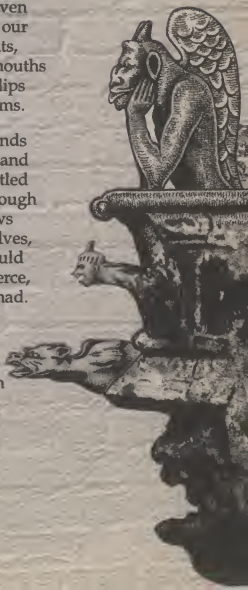
We would stand still  
for hours at a time  
without flinching,  
never blinking,  
glaring into one  
another's countenances,  
baring our static rage  
and indomitable horror  
with pride for all  
the world to see.

When shadows of the sun  
or moon moved across  
the lines and planes  
of our chiseled faces,  
umbra and penumbra  
like shifting scars,  
we would celebrate the  
hideous chiaroscuro  
that light and its  
absence invoked.

The rains would darken  
our expressions further,  
mottling our features  
like a pox, sending  
the dirt from Heaven  
coursing through our  
orifices in torrents,  
spewing from our mouths  
and staining our lips  
in muddied streams.

And when the winds  
teased our cracks and  
crevices and whistled  
and thrummed through  
the stone hollows  
of our wrathful selves,  
the music we would  
make would be fierce,  
lovely, rich, and mad.

— Bruce Boston



While Robert Reed's short story "Eight Episodes" (*Asimov's*, June 2006) and novella "A Billion Eves" (*Asimov's*, October/November 2006) gave the author his seventh and eighth Hugo nominations, the latter tale also gave him his first Hugo Award. In his latest story for us, he investigates the significance of . . .

# THE HOUSE LEFT EMPTY

Robert Reed

**T**he truck was long and white, with a name I didn't recognize stenciled on the side. But that doesn't mean much, what with new delivery services springing up every other day. It was the details I noticed, and I've always been good with details: No serious business would call itself something as drab as Rapid Distribution. The truck's body had been grown from a top-notch Ford-Chevy schematic, tires woven from pricey diamond-studded glass. But the machine acted heavier than I expected, as if somebody had thrown extra steel and aluminum into the recipe—just to help a pair of comatose industries. Instead of a joystick, the driver was holding onto a heavily padded old-fashioned steering wheel, and he was locked in place with three fat seat belts, a cumbersome buckle stuck over his poor groin. Standard federal issue, fancy and inefficient; and, not for the first time, I wondered why we still pretend to pay taxes to the remnants of our oncenational government.

It was mid-morning. I was sitting in my living room, considering my options for the rest of the day. My roof tiles were clean, house batteries already charged, the extra juice feeding into the SG's communal bank. The factory inside my garage had its marching orders—facsimile milk and bananas, a new garden hose and a dozen pairs of socks—and it certainly didn't want my help with those chores. I could have been out in my yard, but last night's downpour had left the ground too soggy to work. I could attack one of the six or seven books I'd been wrestling with lately, or go on-line on some errand sure to lead to a hundred distractions. But with the early warm weather, what I was thinking about was a bike ride. I have four fresh-grown bikes, each designed for a different kind of wandering, but even a decision that simple requires some careful, lazy consideration.

Then the delivery truck drove past my house. I heard the *bang* when it

hit the pothole up the street, and then the long white body swung into view. I immediately spotted the uniformed driver clinging to his steering wheel, trying to read the number that I'd painted beside my front door. He was young and definitely nervous. Which was only natural, since he obviously didn't know our SG. But he saw something worthwhile, pulling up alongside the far curb and parking. The uniform was tan and unmemorable. A clipboard rested on his lap. With a finger leading the way, he reread the address that he was searching for. Then he glanced back up the street. His sliding door was pulled open, but the crash harness wouldn't let him get a good look. So he killed the engine and punched the buckle and climbed down, carrying the clipboard in one hand and noticing me as he strode past my window.

I considered waving, but decided otherwise.

The deliveryman disappeared for a couple of minutes. I wanted to watch him trying to do his job. But my instincts are usually wiser in these matters, and they told me to do nothing. Just sit and wait, guessing that he'd come looking for me eventually.

Which he did.

If anything, the poor guy was more nervous than before, and, deep inside, a little angry. He didn't want to be here. He was having real troubles with our streets and numbers. My guess then, and still, is that he was using a badly compromised database—not an unlikely explanation, what with the EMP blasts over Washington and New York, followed by the Grand Meltdown of the original Internet.

Of course he could have been hunting for me.

But that seemed unlikely, and maybe I didn't want to be found. Climbing back into his truck, he turned on the engine with his thumbprint and a keypad. I couldn't hear the AI's warning voice, but judging by the guy's body language, he didn't want to bother with any damned harness.

Real quick, he looked in through my window, into my house, straight at me sitting on my black facsimile-leather sofa.

Then he drove up to the next corner and turned and came back again, ending up parked two doors west of me.

This time, I got up off the sofa and watched.

His best guess was that the smallest house on my street was the one he wanted. Several minutes were invested in ringing the bell while knocking harder and harder at the old front door. Then after giving the window blinds a long study, he kneeled to look down into the window well, trying to decide if someone was lurking in the cool, damp basement.

Nobody was.

With no other choice, he finally stood and walked my way, sucking at his teeth, one of his hands beating at the clipboard.

I went into the bedroom and waited.

When the bell rang, I waited some more. Just to make him wonder if he had seen me in the first place. Then I opened the door and said, "Yeah?" without unlatching the storm. "What's up?"

The guy was older than I'd first guessed. And up close, he looked like the sort who's usually sharp and together. Organization mattered to this

man. He didn't approve of mix-ups. But he'd been in this delivery game long enough to recognize trouble when it had its jaws around him.

"Sorry to bother you, sir."

"No problem."

"But can I ask . . . do you know your neighbors. . . ?"

"A few of them."

He glanced down at the clipboard's display, just to be sure before saying, "Penderlick?"

"No."

"Ivan Penderlick?"

"What's that first name?"

"Ivan?" he said hopefully.

"No." I shook my head. "Doesn't ring any bell."

This wasn't the news he was hoping for.

"But maybe I've seen him," I mentioned. "What's this Ivan guy look like?"

That could be a perfectly natural question. But the deliveryman had to shake his head, admitting, "They didn't give me any photo."

The Meltdown's first targets were the federal servers.

That's when I opened the storm door, proving that I trusted the man.

"Okay. What address are you chasing?"

"Four-seven-four-four Mayapple Lane," he read out loud. "Are you forty-seven fifty-four Mayapple?"

"That's the old system."

"I realize that, sir."

"We pulled out of the city six years ago," I reported. "New names for our streets, and new numbers."

He flinched, as if his belly ached.

Then I had to ask, "You from around here?"

"Yes, sir."

As liars go, he was awful.

I asked, "Which SG do you belong to?"

He offered a random name.

I nodded. "How's life up there?"

"Fine." Lying made him squirm. Looking at the clipboard, he asked, "Were you once 4754 Mayapple?"

"I was," I said.

"The house two doors down—?"

"That ranch house?"

"Was it 4744?"

"No, I don't think so."

"You don't think so?"

"I'm pretty sure it wasn't. Sorry."

Minor-league mix-ups happened all too often. I could tell from the deliveryman's stooped shoulders and the hard-chewed lower lip.

"Call out for help," I suggested. "Our cell tower can get you anywhere in the world, if you're patient."

But he didn't want that. Unless his hair caught fire, he wouldn't involve his bosses.



"Mayapple was a short street," I mentioned. "Go west, on the other side of the park, and you'd pick it up again. Of course that's a different SG now. The street's got a new name, I don't remember what. But I'd bet anything there's a house waiting, someplace that used to be 3744 Mayapple. Could that be your answer? Your first four is actually a three instead?"

An unlikely explanation, yet he had to nod and hope.

But then as he turned away, he thought to ask, "The name Penderlick doesn't mean anything to you? Anything at all?"

"Sorry, no."

Unlike that deliveryman, I am a superb liar.

Our Self-Governing District is one of the best in the area. At least we like to think so. About five hundred homes stand on this side of the park, along with two bars and a public hall, an automated health clinic and a human dentist, plus a cell tower on talking terms to twenty others, and one big shop that can grow almost anything you can't, and one tiny but very useful service station that not only has liquor to sell on the average day but can keep almost any machine functioning. One of the station mechanics lives one street over from me. We're friends, maybe good friends. But that wasn't the reason I half-ran to his front door.

His name is Jack, but everybody knows him as Gus.

"What do you think he was doing here?" Gus asked me.

"Bringing something special," I allowed. "I mean, if you're the Feds and you're going to send out an entire truck, just for Ivan . . . well, it's going to be an important shipment, whatever it is."

Gus was a tough old gentleman who liked his hair short and his tattoos prominently displayed. Nodding, he asked, "Have you seen our neighbor lately?"

Ivan was never my neighbor. I took over my present house a couple of years after he moved out of his.

"But has he been around lately?" Gus asked.

"Not since he cut his grass last year," I allowed. "Early November, maybe."

It was March now.

"A delivery, huh?"

"From Rapid Distribution."

"Yeah, that's going to be a government name." Gus was grinning. "Didn't I tell you? Ivan was important, back when."

"You said so."

"You do like I told you? Search out his name?"

When I was a kid, the Internet was simple and quick. But that was before the EMP blasts and the Meltdown. Databases aren't just corrupted nowadays; AI parasites are still running wild, producing lies and their own security barriers. What I could be sure of was a string of unreadable papers and a few tiny news items—not much information maybe, but enough to make me accept the idea that my almost-neighbor had once been a heavyweight in the world of science.

Governmental science, to be precise.

"How'd Ivan look, last time you saw him?"

"Okay, I guess."

"How was his weight?"

"He looked skinny," I admitted.

"Cancer-skinny, or fit-skinny?"

I couldn't remember.

Gus used to be friendly with the old Ph.D. "Of course you mentioned that Ivan lives with his daughter now."

"The daughter, is it?"

Gus knew me well enough to laugh. "You didn't tell him, did you?"

"It slipped my mind."

He threw me a suspicious stare. "And is there some compelling reason why you came racing over here two minutes before I'm supposed to go to work?"

"That deliveryman will come back again," I promised.

"If the daughter isn't in their files, sure. Somebody's going to make a couple more stabs to deliver the package. Whatever it is."

"I didn't tell him that the house was empty. What if he shows and finds an old guy sitting on the porch of that house, enjoying the spring sun?"

"I'm supposed to be Ivan?"

"Sure."

"What if it's valuable, this delivery is?"

"Well then," I said. "I guess that depends on how valuable valuable is. If you know what I mean."

I'm not old, but I'm old enough to remember when the world felt enormous, and everybody was busy buying crap and selling crap, using their profits to move fast across the globe. In those times, life was fat and sweet and perfectly reasonable. Why shouldn't seven billion souls fight for their slice of the endless wealth? But still, not everybody agreed with the plan. Environmentalists had valid points; apocalyptic religions had a strong urge toward mayhem. Some governments tried cracking down on all kinds of enemies, real and otherwise, and that spawned some tough-minded groups that wanted to remake the world along any of a hundred different lines.

Our past leaders made some spectacularly lousy decisions, and those decisions led to some brutal years. But it wasn't all just chaos and famine and economic collapse. Good things happened while I was a young man. Like the cheap black tiles that every roof wears today, supplying enough electricity to keep people lit-up and comfortable. Like the engineered bugs that swim inside everybody's biotank, cleaning our water better than any of the defunct sewage systems ever could. And the nanological factories that an average guy can assemble inside his garage, using them to grow and harvest most of the possessions that he could possibly need, including respectable food and fashionable clothes, carbon-hulled bicycles and computers that haven't required improvement for the last ten years.

The old nation-states are mangled. But without any burning need, nobody seems eager to resurrect what used to be.

The old communications and spy satellites have been lost, destroyed by the space debris and radioactive residues stuck in orbit. There are days when I think that it would make sense to reconstitute that old network, but there just aren't enough hands or money, at least for the time being.

A few physical commodities still demand physical transportation: fancy products protected by the best patents or their own innate complexities; one-of-a-kind items with deep sentimental attachments; and certain rare raw materials. But I don't usually hunger for vials of iridium or a kidney grown in some distant vat. My needs are more than being met by my patch of dirt and my black rooftop.

That old world was gigantic, but mine is small: five hundred houses and a slice of parkland, plus the old, mostly empty roads that cut through our little nation, and the pipes and gas mains eroding away under our feet. As an SG, we take care of ourselves. We have laws, and we have conventions and routes that feuding parties can use, if they can't answer their troubles privately. We have a good school for the few kids getting born these days. We even have a system for helping people suffering through a stretch of lousy luck. Which is why nobody remembers the last time anybody in our little nation had to go hungry or feel cold.

But that doesn't mean we can quit worrying about bad times.

While we sat on Ivan's front steps, I gave Gus one-half of a freshly cultured facsimile-orange, and as we sucked on the sweet juice, we discussed the latest news from places that seemed as distant as the far side of the moon.

Ivan's house was the oldest and least impressive on the block—a shabby ranch-style home wearing asphalt roof tiles and aluminum siding. What interested me about his property was the lot itself, double-sized and most of it hidden from the street. The backyard was long and sunny, and I'd walked its green grass enough times to feel sure that the ground was rich, uncontaminated by any careless excavations over the past century. My ground is the opposite: fill-earth clay packed down by machines and chronic abuse. And even though our facsimile foods are nutritious and halfway tasty, everybody enjoys the real tomatoes and squash and raspberries that we grow every summer.

I mentioned the long yard to Gus, and not for the first time.

"It would be nice," he agreed, stuffing the orange rind into the pocket where he always kept his compostables. "We could build a community garden, maybe. It'd help people keep busy and happy."

People were already happy. This would just add to our reasons.

"I hear a truck," he said, tipping his head now.

A low, powerful rumble was approaching. We were a couple of blocks from the main arterial, but without traffic, sounds carried.

I stood. "Good luck, Gus."

"Ivan," he corrected.

"Ivan. Yeah."

My ground was too wet to work, but that's what I was pretending to do when the white truck drove past. I had a shovel in my hand, eyes

staring at a lump of clayish mud. If the driver looked at me, I didn't see it.

This time, the deliveryman knew exactly where he was going.

I didn't look up until I heard the two men talking. At a distance, words didn't carry. But I could tell one of them was nervous and the other was confident. One of them was a long way from home, while the other looked as if he belonged nowhere else in the world but lounging on that front porch.

The driver must have asked for identification, leading Gus to give some story about not having any. Who needs a driver's license in a world where people rarely travel? The deliveryman probably heard that excuse every day, but there were rules: he couldn't just give what he had to anybody, could he?

Then I made out the loud, certain words, "Well, I am Ivan Penderlick. Just ask anybody."

I stood there, waiting to be asked. My plan was to say, "Oh, this is Ivan What's-His-Name? I don't talk to the guy much, you see. I just knew him as The Professor."

But the deliveryman didn't want to bother with witnesses. He probably had a sense for when locals didn't approve of the old government. Which was another hazard in his daily duties, I would think.

All he wanted was a little reassurance.

Gus nodded, pretending to understand. Then he opened the front door that we had jimmed just ten minutes ago. Reaching inside, he pulled out a photograph of himself and his own daughter, and instantly he began spinning a convincing story that might or might not match any sketchy biography that the driver was carrying with him.

"Good enough," was the verdict.

The driver vanished inside his truck, then returned with a dark wooden box just big enough and just heavy enough to require both arms to carry it.

At first, Gus refused to accept the delivery.

I watched him demanding identification before he signed for anything. How else would he know this was on the up and up? His complaining won a hard stare, but then several documents were shown, and with no small amount of relief, the two men parted, each thrilled by the prospect of never seeing the other again.

Burning booze, the truck left for its next delivery somewhere in the wilderness that used to be the United States.

Gus set the box on the front steps, using a screwdriver to pry up a few big staples.

I walked toward him. Part of me expected an explosion, though I can't tell you why. Mostly I was hoping for something with value, something that could offer an ambitious man some leverage. But there was no way I would have expected the hunk of machinery Gus found wrapped inside a sleeve of aerogel, or the simple note stuck under the lid:

"Ivan:

"In a better world, this would be where it belongs."

I stared at the device, not sure what to think.

"Know what you're seeing?" my friend asked.

"No," I admitted. "What?"

"A starship," the older man remarked. Then he sat on the stairs, drooping as if weak. "Who would have believed it? Huh?"

What we had in our hands was a model, I told myself. A mock-up. Something slapped together in an old-style machine shop, using materials that might look and feel genuine but was built for no other purpose than to convince visiting senators and the captains of industry that such wonders were possible if only they would throw so-many billions toward this glorious, astonishing future.

"It isn't real," I said.

Gus made soft, doubting sounds.

"Somebody found it on a shelf somewhere." I was piecing together a believable story. "Somebody who remembers Ivan and thought the old man would appreciate the gift."

"Except," said Gus.

"Except what?"

He handed the starship to me and closed the empty box, and after running a mechanic's thick hand along one edge, he mentioned, "This isn't just a run-of-the-mill packing crate."

It was a walnut box. A nice box, sure.

Then he turned it ninety degrees, revealing a small brass plaque that identified the contents as being Number 18 in an initial culture of 63.

"That's exactly how many starships they made," he told me.

The number was familiar. But I had to ask, "Why sixty-three?"

"Our twenty-one closest star systems were targeted," he explained. "The railgun was supposed to launch three of these wonders at each of them."

The ball in my hands was black and slick, a little bigger than a basketball and heavier than seemed natural. When I was a kid, I'd gone bowling once or twice. This ball was heavier than those. There were a lot of tiny holes and a couple of large pits, and I thought I could see where fins and limbs might pop out or unfold. Of course the starship was a model. Anything else was too incredible. But just the idea that it might be real made me hold it carefully, but away from my body, away from my groin.

"It won't be radioactive," Gus said. "They never bothered fueling things. I'm practically sure of it."

"If you say so." I handed it back to him.

But he didn't hug the ball either, I noticed.

"So," I said. "Do you know where the daughter lives?"

Gus didn't seem to hear me.

"Even if this is a model," I mentioned, "Ivan's going to be thrilled to get it."

Which could earn me some goodwill points in the process.

"I know," said Gus.

"Where the daughter lives?"

"That too. But I just figured how to see if this is real or not." He was holding the mystery with both hands, and after showing me a little

smile—the kind of grin a wicked boy uses with his best buddy—Gus gave a grunt and flung our treasure straight ahead. I wasn't ready. Stunned, I watched it climb in a high arc before dropping to the sidewalk, delivering a terrific blow that I heard and felt, leaving the gray concrete chipped and the starship rolling with a certain majesty over the curb and out into the street.

I ran our treasure down, ready to be angry.

But except for a little dust to wipe away, the starship hadn't noticed any of the abuse.

"Is that enough proof?" I asked doubtfully.

"Unless you've got a sophisticated materials lab tucked in your basement somewhere."

"I'll check."

He laughed.

Then he said, "The daughter lives in the old Highpark area. I got the original address written down somewhere."

And I had a stack of maps pulled out of old phonebooks. Give us enough time, and we'd probably be able to find the right front door.

I made noise about getting one of the bikes and my big trailer.

Gus set the starship back into its aerogel sleeve and then into the box. Then he closed the lid and shook his head, remarking to me, "With a supremely important occasion like this, I believe we should drive."

Our SG has some community cars and small trucks, while a few households have their own little putt-putts. Even if you don't drive much, it's halfway easy to keep your vehicle working, what with a factory in every garage and experts like Gus to putter in the gaps. My friend had a certain client in mind, and while I found my best map of the old city and packed a lunch for each of us, he wandered around the corner to ask one very big favor. By the time I stepped outside again, he was waiting at the end of the drive, sitting behind the joystick of a 2021 Ferrari. That was Mr. Bleacon's baby, manufactured in his own garage by nanologicals steered along by some semi-official schematics, fed nothing but pot metals and stolen pipes and a lot of plastic trash left over from the last century.

"If we're going to ride with a starship," Gus pointed out, "we should have a halfway appropriate vehicle."

We weren't going to get twenty miles to the gallon of alcohol, but just the power of that machine made this into a wondrous adventure.

With our prize stowed in the tiny trunk, I asked, "So what if Number 18 is genuine?"

Gus pushed the joystick forward, and in an instant, we were sprinting out into the wide, empty street.

"You hear me?" I asked.

"Most of the time."

I waited.

"I was expecting that question," he admitted.

"Glad to be predictable."

The first big intersection was marked with Stop signs. But even at a distance, it was easy to see that nobody was coming. Gus accelerated and



blew through, but then as soon as we rolled out of our SG, he throttled back to what was probably a quick-but-legal speed.

"So what if—?" I started asking again.

"You think we should beg for more? More than just ground for our crops?"

"Maybe. If you think about how much money went to making sixty-three of these machines."

"Don't forget the railgun," Gus mentioned. "Before the project ended, they had most of the pieces in orbit, along with enough solar panels to light up half of the United States."

You don't hear those two words much anymore.

United States.

"Do you know how this probe would have worked?" he asked me.

I was watching houses slipping past, and then all at once there was nothing but empty businesses. A strip mall. A couple of abandoned service stations. And then another strip mall, this one with a couple of stores that might have been occupied. A hair cutting place, and some kind of pet store. Two little traces of commerce tucked into the new world order. I didn't often come this way when I biked. There were prettier, easier routes. But I could see where some people would pay for a good barber. As for pets: cats were running free everywhere, but not many dogs or hamsters. Or parakeets either. So until we can grow critters like them in our garages and basements, shops like that would survive.

"The railgun would have fired our probe like a cannon ball," I answered.

"Which is one reason why it has to be tough," Gus explained. "That shell is almost unbreakable, and the guts too. Because of the crushing gee-forces."

I had known Gus for years, but he was revealing interests that I had never suspected.

"How long would it have taken?" I asked, testing him.

"To reach the target star? A few centuries."

What a crazy, crazy project. That's what I thought. But I was careful not to be too honest.

"Three probes to each star system, each one talking to each other two, and occasionally shouting back to us." He scratched his chin, adding, "They would have saved most of their energy for those few days when they'd fly past their targets."

"Fly past? You mean they weren't going into orbit or anything?"

"Too much momentum. No engines to slow them down." Gus paused for a moment, and then asked, "Do I turn here?"

"Left. I think."

The Ferrari changed its momentum without complaint.

I had to say, "It seems a huge waste."

"What?"

"Throwing half a trillion dollars or whatever it was at the stars, and getting nothing out of it but a quick look-see."

With a hard voice, he said, "You're young."

I don't feel that young anymore. But I asked, "So what?"

"You don't remember how things were." Gus shrugged and gave a big



sigh before adding, "The probe couldn't go into orbit. But do you know what's inside that black ball?"

I said, "No."

I looked down at the map and said, "Right. Turn here, right."

We were cruising up a fresh street. Some of the houses were abandoned. No, most of them were. Now I remembered another reason why I never came this way on my bike. Political troubles in a couple of SGs had gotten out of hand. In the end, the Emergency Council dispatched police to mash down the troubles, teaching all the parties to act nice.

"What's inside the black ball?" I asked, prompting him.

"The original nanochines," he told me.

Which I halfway remembered, maybe.

"Tiny bits of diamond dust filled with devices and knowledge." He came to another intersection. "Straight?"

"Looks like." I had the old address circled on the yellowed map.

"Anyway," said Gus, "those bits of dust would have been squirted free long before the star was reached. They had tiny, tiny parachutes that would have opened. Light sails, really. The sunlight would have killed their velocity down to where they would start to drift. Each probe carried a few thousand of those amazing little devices. And if one or two landed on a useful asteroid, they would have come awake and started eating sunlight for energy, feed on rock and divide themselves a million million times. And eventually we would have a large loud automated base permanently on station, screaming back at us."

"In a few centuries' time," I said.

He nodded. "As good as our shops are? As much crap as we can make from nothing but trash and orange peels? The marvels sleeping in that pregnant machine make our tools look like stone knives and flintlock pistols."

Which is when I pointed out, "So maybe this starship thing is worth a whole lot."

Gus slowed the car and then looked over at me.

"I'm just mentioning the obvious," I said.

And for the first and only time, Gus told me, "I like you, Josh. I do. But that doesn't mean I have illusions when it comes to your nature. Or infinite patience with your scheming, either. Understood?"

I gave a nod.

Then he shoved the joystick forward, pressing me hard into the rich fake leather of the seat.

It was easy to see why Old Ivan abandoned his little house to live with his daughter.

Every building standing just outside her large SG had been torn down, and people with resources and a lot to lose had built themselves a wall with the rubble—a tall thick castle-worthy wall made from the scavenged bricks and stone, concrete blocks and two-by-fours. I'd heard stories about Highpark, but until that moment, I hadn't bothered coming up this way. At least twenty signs warned off the curious and uninvited. There was only one entranceway that we could find, and it was guarded by military-grade robots and a tall titanium gate. We parked outside and approach-

ing on foot, me walking a half-step behind Gus. Weapons at the ready, the robots studied our faces while searching their databases for any useful clues to our identities and natures. I decided to let my friend do the talking. Quietly, gently, Gus explained that an important package had been delivered to the wrong address, and if possible, would they please inform Ivan Penderlick that his old neighbors had come to pay their respects?

A call was made on our behalf.

After what seemed like an hour, the gate unlocked with a sharp *thunk*, and we were told to leave our vehicle where it was. Only our bodies and the package would be allowed inside the compound.

There are SGs, and there are SGs.

No doubt this was the best one I'd ever seen. Every house was big and well-maintained, sitting in the middle of huge lawns that were covered with greenhouses and extra solar panels, towering windmills and enough cell phone antennas to keep every resident connected to the world at the same time.

The house that we wanted was wearing a richer and blacker and much more efficient brand of solar paneling.

The greenhouses were top-of-the-line, too.

Of course I could always build my own greenhouses. But without the power for climate control, the plants would freeze during the cold winter nights, and come summer, when the sun was its best, everything inside the transparent structures would flash-fry.

Stopping on the front walk, I stared at red tomatoes begging to be picked.

Carrying the walnut box, Gus reached the front door before me, and he said, "Ma'am," before turning back to me, saying, "Come on, Josh. We're expected."

The daughter was Gus's age, give or take.

But she didn't look like the tattoo kind of gal.

The woman said, "My father's sleeping now. Could I get you gentlemen something to drink?"

Gus said, "Water."

I said the same, adding, "Thank you, ma'am."

She came back with a pitcher filled with ice water and three tall glasses, and once everybody was sitting politely, she asked if she could see what was inside the mysterious box.

Gus handled the unveiling.

I watched the lady's face. All it took was a glance, and she knew what she was seeing. Her dark eyes grew big and the mouth opened for a long moment, empty of words but obviously impressed.

Then Gus said, "We'd like your father to have this. Naturally."

She didn't seem to hear him. With a slow nod, she asked, "Exactly how did you come by this object?"

I jumped in, telling the story quickly, passing over details that might make us out to be in the wrong.

At the end of the story, she sighed.

Then she heard a sound that neither of us had noticed. Suddenly she stood up and said, "Dad's awake now. Just a minute, please."

We were left alone for a couple of minutes. But I had the strong feeling that various eyes, electronic and otherwise, were keeping watch over us.

When the daughter returned, a skeletal figure was walking at her side, guided along by one of her hands and a smooth slow voice that kept telling him, "This way, Dad. This way, this way."

Winter had transformed Old Ivan.

He was a shell. He was wasted and vacant and simple, sitting where he was told to sit and looking down into the box only when his daughter commanded him to do that. For a long moment, he stared at the amazing machine that he once helped build. Then he looked up, and with a voice surprisingly strong and passionate, he said, "I'm hungry. I want to eat."

"Sure, Dad. I'll get you something right now."

But she didn't do anything. She just sat for another couple of moments, staring at the precious object that he hadn't recognized.

One last time, I looked at the starship, and then Gus took me by the elbow and took us toward the front door.

"Anyway," he said to the daughter, "it's his. It's yours."

"Maybe he'll remember it later," she said coolly, without real hope.

Then I said, "We were hoping, ma'am. Hoping that we could earn something for our trouble today."

Gus gave me a cutting look.

But our hostess seemed pleased. Her suspicions about us had been vindicated. With a suspicious smile, she asked, "What would you like?"

"It's about that empty house," I admitted.

"Yes?"

"And the lot it sits on," I added. "As it is, all of that is going to waste."

She looked at Gus now. "I'm surprised," she admitted. "You people could have taken it over, and who would have stopped you?"

"Except it's not ours," Gus allowed.

How many times had I dreamed of doing just that? But our SG has its rules, and there's no more getting around them.

"I should warn you," she mentioned. "I promised my dad that as long as he's alive, that house remains his. But when he is gone, I will send word to you, and after that you and your people will be free to do whatever you want with the building and its land. Is that fair?"

"More than fair," Gus agreed.

"But how about today?" I asked.

Suddenly both of them were throwing daggers with their eyes. But I just laughed it off, suggesting, "What about a sack of fresh tomatoes? Would that be too much trouble, ma'am?"

For maybe half the drive home, Gus said nothing.

I thought he was angry with me. I couldn't take it seriously, but I was thinking of charming words when he broke the silence. Out of nowhere, Gus said, "This is what makes me sad," and it had nothing to do with me.

"Think of everything we've got in our lives," he said. "The water that we clean for ourselves. The food we grow in our garages. The easy power, and the machinery, plus all the independence that comes with the SG life."

These aren't tiny blessings, Josh. A century ago, no one was able to stand apart from the rest of the world so completely, so thoroughly."

"I guess not," I allowed.

"But there's this big, big house, you see. And it's just sitting empty."

"Ivan's place isn't big," I reminded him.

But then Gus pointed at the sky, shaking his head sadly as he began to speak again. "With even the most basic tools, you and I and the rest of our SG could equip our own starship. Not a little ball thrown out of a cannon. No, I'm talking about an asteroid or comet with us safe in the middle, starting a ten thousand year voyage to whichever sun we want our descendants to see first."

"I guess that would work," I allowed.

"The biggest house of all is the universe, and it's going to waste," Gus said.

Then he pushed the joystick forward, pushing the big engine up to where it finally began to come awake.

"Sometimes I wish that we'd taken a different turn," he called out.

"Who doesn't think that?" I asked, watching our speed pick up, the world around us starting to blur. ○

## SPEAK WITHOUT GRAVITY

Speak without gravity to my ears  
in this teacup of a space station  
and I will wait on you, weightlessly.

Look: for rendezvous the shuttle nears,  
matching its spin to our gyration.  
At orbital speeds we dance slowly

closer to stillness: so it appears  
to us, as we drift with emotion.  
Our abated motions, breathlessly

awaited, weigh on us. Seeming years  
slip by. Sensory agitation  
stirs the air as you so lowly

Speak without gravity to my ears  
in this teacup of a space station  
where I still wait for you, weightlessly.

—Mark Rich



Merrie Haskell lives in southeast Michigan where she studies information science and works in a ninety-year-old library. Her fiction has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Escape Pod*, and other venues. Readers can find out more about her work at [www.merriehaskell.com](http://www.merriehaskell.com). In her first tale for *Asimov's*, she inhabits the thoughts of a collaborator in order to forecast . . .

# AN ALMANAC FOR THE ALIEN INVADERS

Merrie Haskell

**I**n January, there will be an annular solar eclipse, with the path of annularity moving through the Indian Ocean and into Sumatra and Borneo. Two days later, aliens will invade Earth.

No spaceships will loom large in blue skies, nor hover over our cities. At night, though, when we see blinking dots of light near the horizon, as small and pale as any star, we'll think they're planes or satellites of human origin. They won't be. These are alien ships, come for conquest.

That is all we can see. What we hear is just as faint and difficult to resolve: we hear rumors. Or rather, one persistent rumor: "the aliens want volunteers."

Naturally, I and my junior faculty friends need to drink quantities of beer to discuss this in detail. I expound that it's a hoax.

"If there are alien overlords hovering above the ionosphere," I say, "and our government can't attack them because our weapons don't work, and our President has never met with them because we don't know how to talk to them, then how did *they* learn Earth languages well enough to spread rumors?"

"Maybe they learned English from watching TV," David says. We laugh at him, this poor faculty spouse, because we are not nice people.

Shelby, the ethnolinguist of the group, leans forward to tell David ex-

actly *how alien* an alien language should be, and my god, doesn't he understand the first thing about the transmission of culture? Shelby is a little drunk and a little abrupt, and David leaves with his wife soon after.

To cut the tension, I propose a toast to the aliens. "No better distraction from worrying about one's tenure case," I say, before I admit that I can't actually guess how culture will be transmitted to the aliens, because we haven't even seen one. We haven't seen more than the blurriest amateur telescope image of one of the ships. We can't guess much from these indistinct pictures: the ships are chunky and squarish, unrevealing of cultural identity.

"The universe must not be very crowded," I speculate.

"Why's that?" Jim, my husband, asks.

Shelby grins, leaning close to Jim. Jim doesn't flinch. He knows Shelby well; they're great friends when Shelby isn't drunk.

"When humans left Africa," Shelby says, and the whole table groans. "*When humans left Africa*," she bellows over the groans, pounding the table, "they didn't have art, or decoration, and there wasn't much to distinguish between a tribal group living in Europe and one living in Asia. That's because a tribal group had a range of—" she spreads her arms wide—"well, a range of *plenty* of hunting territory. Resources not so much at a premium, you see?"

Jim nods.

Shelby continues: "But then you start to get some population going. Your kids can't just wander off to form a new band in your tribe without butting into some other group's territory. There is conflict. People gotta know who's an enemy and who's a friend on sight, from a distance. These people—" she pulls over the salt and pepper shakers—"start painting their faces red. And these people—" she pulls over a stack of coasters—"start painting their faces white. Primitive differentiation begins." She bashes the salt and pepper shakers into the stack of coasters, making them fight.

"Shelby," Jim says, taking her hand to stop the spice/coaster wars. "Shelby, my face isn't red."

"Sure it is," she says. "And white and blue." She points with her free hand to the Stars and Stripes hanging over the bar. "There's your face paint right there."

"So, you expected the alien ship to have . . . stripes?" Jim asks. I think his thumb is massaging her palm, but I attribute it to everyone being just a little drunk.

"Something like that," I say, taking his hand out of Shelby's. I won't point out that maybe there's an alien biology at work that wouldn't differentiate by *sight*, anyway.

We'll drink a lot that night, and talk to little purpose.

In February, the groundhog will see his shadow, and a million people will disappear overnight.

No one will dare suggest it's the Rapture aside from a few pundits, because no one who disappears will belong to any religious group that believes in the Rapture.

The day of the disappearance, only half my students drag in to my eleven o'clock, looking frightened and disheveled. A grad student ducks in at twenty after to announce that classes for the rest of the day are cancelled. The students sigh as one, but not in relief.

Most of them don't leave. Most of them look at me, their eyes moist with worry and belief that I can make sense of it all. I can't, of course.

"I don't know how to explain the disappearances," I say. "Beyond what everyone already believes, that it's the aliens."

"The rumors," one student, Marlana Fitch, says, blurting it out even to her own surprise. "What about the rumors that the aliens wanted volunteers?"

"Volunteers for what, though?" I shrug. "I've heard they want colonists, collaborators, ambassadors, specimens, interpreters . . ." I tick them off on my fingers.

Gregory Lin says: "No, they want the disenchanteds, the disenfranchised, the poor, the homeless, the desperate, the terminally ill—"

"But," I interrupt, "did anyone ever hear a rumor of how you're supposed to sign up?"

No one says anything.

We talk about wife-stealing as a form of exogamy in primitive societies, because I can't think of any other direction to go. One student blanches because he's afraid I'm talking about having sex with aliens. "Exogamy is a metaphor," I tell him. "If the aliens are kidnapping people, or taking volunteers, or whatever, it's probably for cultural exchange, or maybe slavery—but not because they're trying to breed half-aliens." *I hope*, I add mentally.

In March, the equinox will occur on the twentieth at 11:46 UT, and my tenure will be denied.

I go home early and sit in the dark, waiting for Jim to come home. He's much later than I expect. I think about all the times I have seen him touch Shelby's hand, not liking how any of it makes me feel. When he returns, I don't confront him, because I don't want to lose my husband and my career on the same day. I lie about the tenure, saying they haven't made up their minds yet.

At least both of us are lying.

In March, the aliens will be quiet. I won't even hear their rumors.

In April, the Northern Hemisphere will see an unusual streak of early warm weather; a second million people will disappear; and violence will break out around the world.

Safe in the Midwest, I start my job-hunt, having no interest in staying where I can't get tenure, and where I'm unwanted anyway. Job-hunting is the secret focus of my life until the second million disappears.

This time, the university doesn't cancel classes until they realize one of their own—a student—has been taken. My class begins before the cancellation, however, and my students show up looking dazed, depressed. This is no longer the rational world they were promised by their liberal arts educations.

We talk through the whole class period about the aliens, but we don't



really manage to relate it to anthropology. Gregory Lin says, "I didn't hear any rumors this time."

Marlena Fitch whispers, "Maybe they weren't volunteers this time."

That evening, violence erupts in D.C. Vigils for the lost turn into protests, protests turn into demonstrations of grief and despair, and demonstrations turn into riots. I curl up on the couch in the fetal position, watching the news coverage. Jim comes home late, and he pretends he is not late by not talking to me at all.

The next morning, the flag on the quad is at half-staff.

I sit beside a patch of daffodils in the unseasonably warm weather to eat my lunch. Gregory Lin walks past and notices me there. "Professor Naidu?"

I look up, squinting into the too-bright sky, and Gregory slides down next to me. The talk turns inevitably to the aliens; there is no other topic.

Longingly, Gregory looks out over the somber crowds of students thronging to class. "Is this how it will be?" he asks. "Will we live in fear, always, that aliens will take us?"

"We don't know they weren't volunteers, Gregory."

We will talk about secret police and regimes of fear. Neither of us will convince the other, but that's because neither of us will truly know what we believe in that time, after the second million are taken.

In May, minimal rainfall will lead to drought conditions across the Midwest, and I will make contact.

First, though, Jim will confess his affair, guilt clinging to him like body odor. Instead of playing out the scene as he expects, I tell him about losing my tenure case two months previous, and then, because I cry more than I expected to when Jim tells me the truth, I leave the house and go for a long night drive.

About two hundred miles from home, I find myself with a dead cell battery and no charger. I stop at an all-night super-grocery to buy a disposable phone. On the way into the store, I spot a neon blue sticker on a light pole. "Archaeology of Consuls" it reads, with a toll-free number beneath.

I remember the term from discussions of archaeology in the colonial era. A single archaeologist was responsible for excavations in an entire colonial power's holdings—vast stretches of Africa, for example, a stretch that now comprises four or six modern countries, all under the auspices of one man (for, of course, the only archaeologists in those days were men). The archaeologist was solely an agent of colonial power; all finds were sent to the homeland as a matter of course—there was no question about leaving items in country for the sake of colonial identity, unless the find was too large and had to be abandoned *in situ*. It was a treasure-hunting, grave-robbing, Indiana-Jones style of archaeology, belonging to another age. Strange to think of some teenager's garage band with this title.

I buy the disposable cell, but instead of dialing home, I call the toll-free number scrawled below "Archaeology of Consuls." What the hell. One ring and a warm female voice asks my name. I feel displaced enough to give it to her.

"Dr. Naidu? We've been hoping you would call."

I will know then, right away, that I have unwittingly made contact with the aliens.

In June, the solstice will occur at 05:45 UT, and I will become an alien collaborator.

My contact with the aliens remains secret for the better part of a week. Graduation is over, having taken place at the end of May before I turned in my final grades (this is, and perhaps always will be, one of the ironies of higher education). Gregory Lin comes to see me while I'm simultaneously packing up my office and grading term papers, on the first day of June.

"Professor Naidu?"

"Please, call me Elizabeth. I'm no longer your professor."

He is awkward, made uncomfortable by the wall I've destroyed, but too polite to refuse the request. He avoids calling me by name for the rest of the conversation. "I was . . ." He appears to be twisting the air between his hands, a gesture I recognize from when he would twist his winter cap between his hands during my office hours. "I wanted to thank you for the recommendations you wrote for me."

"You're welcome. I hope you get your pick of grad schools."

He takes a deep breath, then looks around at the denuded office walls. "You're moving offices?"

"My tenure was denied, actually. I'm moving on."

"What?" He looks shocked. "You're a great teacher, one of the best I've had."

"Teaching, sadly, is not a highly-ranked merit at a research institution such as this one."

"What are you going to do now?"

I hesitate. How do I tell him, or anyone, what I have done? "I have accepted another position elsewhere."

"Where?"

I'm not ready to lie to him, though I've managed to lie to Jim, my parents, and my colleagues. I hedge: "I've joined the Starpath Syndicate." A code, known only to other traitors.

His face flushes and his eyes brighten. "Me too!" he cries. I sit back in my desk chair with a thump.

"I'm going," he says. "I couldn't . . . I needed to *know* what they're doing. So, I will."

"Your position?"

He shrugs. "Entry level. I have to take a placement test. I don't have enough education to be an expert, but I've got the smarts and the drive they want." He sounds like he's quoting.

"How did they find you?"

He shuffles his feet, before admitting, "I found them."

"How?" I am fascinated, and perhaps relieved, to have found someone, anyone, to share the experience with.

"I heard the rumors. Most often from the homeless guy who stands out by the psych building. You know, 'Spare any change, my good, good friend? All right, have a blessed day.'" His imitation is spot on, capturing the

husky lilt of the man's voice perfectly. "That guy. Only, now he doesn't ask for money, he just stands there muttering. You have to get close to hear that he's saying he knows the way out, that he can hook you up, that there's an alternative."

"An alternative?"

Gregory finally sits in my guest chair, and pulls out a battered lab notebook. He flips to the middle and cracks it open on my desk. "A chart. Suicide attempts in the months prior to the alien arrival, and suicide attempts post-arrival. You can see the drop—it's statistically significant."

"But the death rate from suicide hasn't dropped any." It's all there, charted in black, white, and red.

"Suicide attempts—the kind with a dramatic failure rate—have different psychological motivations than the guaranteed methods. The aliens are poaching the personalities that want to make the gesture but don't want to die."

"Oh."

"Yeah. Psych minor!" He points at himself, managing to be both apologetic and smug, then flips to another page where the calculations are too dense for me to grasp at once. "Okay, and this. I determined that the disappearances are too well-coordinated to be done with anything other than an instantaneous sort of beaming device, like in *Star Trek* or whatever. It takes a lot of time to move a million bodies. Not every nation, state or municipality has good statistics on how many went missing—after all, a million is merely a guess, an extrapolated average, and there were wild variances in the reporting. . . . But, for convenience's sake, I worked with a million. Anyway, everyone disappeared at night—some time between midnight and six AM, local time, and the timing was different in different time zones. The aliens were working with the rotation of the Earth. The sweep—"

"Right, I get it. What does this all mean?"

"It means," and he fairly bubbles over with enthusiasm, "that they moved about seven hundred people a minute. If they did it all in twenty-four hours. But I think they did it in several days, not twenty-four hours, and moved less than a hundred people a minute, so I figured out that they have a max capacity up there . . . anyway! I explained all of this to the homeless guy, and he didn't say anything, but I got a phone call in the middle of the night."

I nod thoughtfully, uncertain of how to respond.

Gregory says, "They have an efficient bureaucracy." This redefines understatement for me.

## MOVING?

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"I'm aware. I'll shortly be an assessor in the Consulate for Cultural Preservation of Conquered Nations."

Gregory frowns. "What does the Consulate for Cultural Preservation of Conquered Nations do?"

"Loot and pillage," I say, far more lightly than I should.

On July seventh, a penumbral lunar eclipse will be visible in most of Australia and the Americas, and the aliens will take over two thousand acres of the Sahara Desert to build a space port.

I will take the month of July to say farewell to my life on Earth.

Jim and I meet one last time to divide up our things. When I refuse to take most of it, Jim snaps, "Stop being a martyr, El."

This accusation tips the scales of my good humor. I slam the toaster across the table, bouncing it like a basketball. It breaks into three pieces. "Do not accuse me of martyrdom, and don't call me 'El.' Only people who love me get to call me 'El.'"

Jim stares, shocked. We've never been violent, even towards inanimate objects. But he rallies, coming back with, "Oh, please. You don't want the crystal? You *love* the crystal. Get down off your cross and take the god-damned crystal!"

"I loved the crystal because it was *our* crystal. And I don't love the crystal enough to store it for thirty years, which is the length of my contract with our alien overlords."

"Your *what*?"

I consider explaining it all to him, but it ends up that I just smile like I was kidding. "You take the crystal. Maybe Shelby will love the crystal because she can pretend she stole it from me, too." I know this to be untrue, but I owe Shelby nothing.

I walk away from that scene with Jim and go to my mother's house. I spend a long, lustrous July at the lake. In the evenings, I sit on the porch, letting the cool air relieve my sunburn, watching the colors fade in streaks from the summer sky. I try not to believe it is for the last time.

On July twenty-second, there will be a total solar eclipse, visible in the land of my ancestors. We won't be able to see it from the lake.

On August fourteenth, Jupiter will be at opposition, and I will let aliens experiment on my body.

Well, it won't be the aliens themselves, but their human techs. There'll be about a dozen others in my ward at the space port hospital, where we make jokes about how the aliens are rebuilding us to be better, stronger, faster. But we receive no bionic eyes or legs; we just get a biomechanical chip implanted in our torso to track us, a biomechanical port in our arms so we can interface efficiently with our new PDAs, and a whole lot of gene therapy to extend our lifespans. We all have thirty-year contracts, with a sixty-year guaranteed retirement. Since I'm already pushing forty, this is attractive.

"Is this really going to work?" Tina, my roommate, asks Dr. Edgars while we're sitting side by side in the lab. "I'm going to live for another ninety years? Healthily?" Tina gives me a significant look, to see if I'm

paying attention. We've talked about the health plan before bed every night since we got to the space port.

"You won't die from old age and you won't die from genetic disease," Dr. Edgars says. "Death in the line of duty . . . hard to say. Resuscitation is mandatory while you're under contract, but you can opt out when you retire."

"Mandatory?"

"Well, we have to *try*. I don't think even the aliens can bring back someone who's been blown to smithereens."

I ask, "How common is it for Syndicate archaeologists to get blown up in the line of duty, anyway?"

"Don't know. I've only been at this for a few months." Dr. Edgars smiles blandly. "But I haven't lost an archaeologist yet."

In September, Uranus will come to opposition on the seventeenth, and I will not yet have met an alien.

Xeno-acclimation classes take up the better part of September. We see pictures, then films, then three-dimensional projections of the various aliens in the Starpath Syndicate: the bipedal Lurians, whose neural systems are most like ours, and the squidlike Txike, whose eyeballs and visual perceptions are nearly identical to our own. Similarities emphasized, differences glossed over.

There's a primer on the corporate structure of the universe. We learn how a species is beholden to the Syndicate for a period of service calculated using the race's base numerical system and their natural generational span, not to exceed a certain factorial of the number of digits on their dominant hand. Using the most important available example: humans will be kept in service for thirty-three hundred years, a period that represents a hundred generations (one hundred being significant in our base ten)—but our service could not exceed five thousand years in any case (digits on one hand: five). The system, as far as I'm able to deduce, is fairly arbitrary, but the point is clear: humanity's servitude will be lengthy. Such is the way of conquest and enslavement.

After our service is complete, humanity will be eligible for premium membership in the Syndicate, at which time we'll also be free to establish our own syndicate if we can persuade at least two other species to join. Syndicates, of course, don't operate in a vacuum; each syndicate is a member of a consortium, and each consortium reports to some other ruling body—in short, Freemasons rule the universe, just as I always suspected.

"Pyramid schemes," Cora March says, shaking her head while we relax in the commissary after a primer session. "Somehow, I got recruited to sell Amway."

Cora, my boss, plays subconsul to my junior assessor in the Consulate for Cultural Preservation of Conquered Nations. I like her straight off, as I also like most of the assessors. We form a clique in the two months of training camp.

"What is never said," Julian, my fellow assessor, notes, "is how we should regard the Lurians."

"As brothers-in-arms," Cora says. "They're client members, half-conquered like us. The only difference is that they've been assimilated for so many generations that they can be relied upon not to go xeno-batshit-crazy. Just like my grandchildren will be."

We fall silent for a moment, with the women exchanging significant glances. Childless Cora, in her mid-forties, is counting on alien biotech to allow her to bear children into her seventies—in thirty years, since the terms of our contracts specify no pregnancies.

Somehow, her faith in the future—and in the aliens—makes our choices more real, more hopeful, more terrifying.

In October, the full moon will occur on the fourth at 06:10 UT. I will only be able to imagine it, as I will have departed Earth.

While boarding the Consulate shuttle for my new home beyond the sky, I think about Gregory Lin's speculations on beam-me-up-Scotty technology. There's no evidence for such a beam, unless the shuttle trip is just a ruse, a test of our xeno-acclimation: our pilots are Lurian.

They await us at the shuttle doors, looking taller than their photographs and more alien than expected. Their Syndicate uniforms are strange to us, looking like towels swaddling their hips, and the female's breasts are bared. The people standing behind me in line are a study in human agitation displayed through body language: the Lurians are too different, too strange, too awful to contemplate, and at least one man bolts for the door. Somehow, that reassures me. "The aliens don't have a complete handle on our psyche then," I say to Cora.

She's not paying the least attention to the events behind us; her eyes are for the Lurians. "Are you seeing what I'm seeing?" she asks. "Chordates, interior spinal chords. Bipedal. Bilateral symmetry . . . but more than that! Breasts. Nipples! Lactation?"

I see then what she sees, and slowly become amazed too. "They could have evolved on Earth!"

"I'm beginning to think there's something to the panspermia theory, after all."

The man ahead of me in line hyperventilates when he passes the Lurians, but I walk past with Cora behind me, head high and blood pressure low.

Syndicate ships are named for prime numbers. I live aboard 3491 on a long corridor of junior assessors. Once we settle in, Cora has her assessors to her room for drinks.

"How did you smuggle alcohol up here?" Julian asks.

Cora shakes her head. "Not smuggled. The Syndicate tells me that it's my job to promote social bonding within my group. Which means they pay for the alcohol: drink up."

We discuss what we've seen of life on 3491 so far. Someone mentions how much they'll miss the sky. Buzzed and not a little homesick already, Cora eagerly shows us the skychamber, where much of our work in the Consulate will take place.

The skychamber is an empty room spanning nearly the whole width of 3491. The transparent ceiling reveals a magnificent starscape, and we



stand beneath it in entranced awe, staring up, grateful for the artificial gravity that makes this scene beautiful instead of nauseating.

"This is the skychamber. This is where we'll display . . . our collection." Cora hesitates on the last words, and how can she not? What we will undertake in the name of the alien conquest is almost unbearable to talk about.

To enliven the somber mood, Cora breaks out two gravfield manipulators. We practice with them by picking up our shoes, pulling each other's hair, and finally, tossing each other around in a bizarre game of keep-away, wherein the loser of the match becomes the ball—all without touching anything but the controls on our new tools.

When the alcohol is finished and the buzz disappears, we wander morosely back to our rooms. Most of us pick someone to spend the night with; I chose Julian. Afterwards, we wonder aloud to each other: was this primal urge to mate some sort of xenophobic reaction?

"This is why anthropologists shouldn't sleep together," he says after this speculation. "We suck the romance out of any encounter by wondering what evolutionary drive brought us together at this moment in time."

I laugh. "This is why anthropologists *should* sleep together. We don't have to suppress our natural urges to wonder these things aloud."

But the laughter dies away, and we're just two humans together in the darkness: afraid of the aliens, yes, but also afraid of ourselves.

In November, the moon will be new on the sixteenth, and we will make our first sacrifices.

The Consulate for Cultural Preservation of Conquered Nations is the archaeology of consuls writ large. Cora explains and explains, but it falls to each of us to come to grips with the meaning for ourselves. It is not until we are deconstructing Rome itself that I really understand.

While I stare at a three-dimensional rendering of the internal schematics of Constantine's Arch, measuring stresses on the marble as we take it apart, Cora comes to stand beside me.

"The Great Trajanic Frieze," she says in a tone of appropriate reverence. The Frieze moves slowly in midair, suspended by a grav-manipulator piloted by Julian.

"Indeed." I look up at the ancient depiction of a Roman triumph. "It

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doesn't take much effort these days to identify with the fallen barbarian."

"I try not to think that way," Cora says. "I don't think that the Syndicate looks down on us as trampled barbarians . . . but rather, they look upon themselves as Winged Victory."

"That would make the Lurians the trampling horsemen," I say with distaste.

"More the horses than the horsemen," Cora returns mildly.

It's fitting to loot Rome first. We are to strip the Earth of its state art, its monumental art—all its artifacts of power—and transport this bounty to the ruling planets of the Consortium, where it will be on display for the length of humanity's service to the Starpath Syndicate. Just like Rome, who led the conquered leaders and the captured wealth of nations through their streets to assert their dominion over the world, so the Syndicate asserts its dominion over our species.

That night, the meaning of my collaboration becomes fully clear: we are stealing not only the monumental art of current states, but that of states past—the Lincoln Memorial and the Parthenon and the Great Stupa at Sanchi alike will be given to our conquerors, and I will be a key player in this rape of humanity's art. I wander 3491 for hours, shivering and praying for redemption.

Eventually, I find myself in the human commissary gorging on chocolate and cheese, wondering how to back out of an irreversible contract. Wondering how to avoid becoming a traitor to my own race.

Cora's quiet voice intrudes into my frantic consumption. "I wondered when it would hit you."

I swallow a mouthful of Havarti. "I had told myself it would be okay. Because most tombs are disallowed. We wouldn't be grave robbers that way."

"Did you speak with someone from home?" she asks, drawing up a chair.

"Hm? No. Why?"

"Well, that's when I broke down. When my dissertation advisor wrote me a letter, and said, 'The name of Cora March will go down as the worst sycophant of tyrants, the vilest traitor, the most heinous thief of human culture, the ultimate robber of graves.'"

I stare at her.

"And what my mother said was even worse," she says, her hand hovering over a piece of my chocolate. "May I?"

I nod. She peels the wrapper carefully, before saying, "In three thousand years, when these treasures are returned intact to the Earth, will our descendants revile my name and the names of my assessors? There are few enough monuments on Earth now that are three thousand years old."

"In three thousand years, I probably won't care."

"It is the way of humanity to conquer." She contemplates another chocolate. "There are societies still extant on Earth that never practiced war, and now they scrape out livings on the edges of the habitable world. But for most of us, conquest has long been an ancestral goal. And now it's hap-

pened to us, to *all* of us, all at once. We feel like victims, but it is no more than what we should have expected.

"And now, for a hundred generations, we have to live with conquest. We'll lose some art—the trappings of conquest, mainly—and we'll lose our right to fight with each other, and we'll lose our right to keep a billion people in poverty, while half a million live like gluttonous kings. And we'll lose our perceived right to a manifest destiny in the stars. But what will we gain?"

"Isn't this the age-old argument in favor of colonialism? The apologists' argument?"

"With a certainty; only I think that the aliens are better at carrying the white man's burden than ever the white men were." She says this with an air of wry detachment; her skin isn't as dark as mine, but it's far from lily-white.

"To be colonized is to be removed from history."

"Walter Rodney," she says, nodding acknowledgement. "But whose history? To the galaxy at large, we're just now joining the course of history. What we did before now is the rough mythology of a subaltern species."

Again, a colonial apologist's argument.

Uncomforted, I thank her, and leave to seek my bed.

On December thirty-first, a partial lunar eclipse will be visible throughout the Eastern Hemisphere and most of Europe. Throughout the month of December, I will loot the Earth.

On Christmas night at 03:27 UT, I'll be awakened by a persistent beeping from my PDA.

When I cup my hand over the screen to keep the light from waking Julian, I see that I am summoned to 7883 immediately and at high priority.

I think, with the clear profundity of those awakened suddenly, that there is no time when one feels more human than when one is summoned to aid another in the middle of the night. I stumble from bed, get dressed, and trace a path through the sleep-silent human quadrant of 3491. At the shuttle launch it is borne upon me with distinct surreality that *this is my life*.

A Lurian waits at the Consulate's shuttle to pilot me across the void to 7883. I think for the first time in months of Gregory Lin and his teleportation beam postulate; I've still seen no evidence that the Syndicate possesses such technology. We are shuttled everywhere. I do not once think of how alien the Lurian appears, and the Lurian's smile seems natural, not predatory.

As if I plucked the thought of Gregory Lin from the collective unconscious, I find that he is the reason for the summons to 7883.

A doctor tells me that Gregory has had an extreme xenophobic reaction in conjunction with a suicide attempt. "He asked for you. He says he knew you before he joined the Syndicate."

"He was my student."

Gregory sits reading a book in a hospital bed, not at all the portrait of a

suicidal xenophobe. He smiles and tells me calmly about his life since boarding 7883. He misses home, family, the ex-girlfriend he never had a chance to make up with . . . He tells me how much he fears the Lurians, and how the Txike are even worse, and how much he hates the mission of the Syndicate. He tells me that he cannot see the point of all the sacrifices demanded of humanity, from the colony ships being sent from Earth to planets unknown, to the humans who idiotically donated themselves to the Syndicate for medical experimentation, to my own mission of stripping the Earth of its great treasures.

Gregory rambles until he flails. The doctors ask me to step away for a moment while they sedate him. I ask them, "Is he going to recover?"

"With the kind of break he's had . . . well, there's no place on Earth where he can go and avoid thinking about the aliens, and that's what he needs. But their presence permeates every facet of life now." The doctor shakes his head, saying in a burst of amazement, "They're disassembling every army on the planet, did you hear?"

I nod.

In a lower voice, the doctor says, "There's talk on Earth of setting up refuges where humans can go, where no news or talk of aliens is allowed."

"Asylums? Or reservations."

"In effect." The doctor looks as troubled as I feel. "That's where I'd like to send him, but they're only available for the extremely wealthy."

"Is there anything I can do, here and now?"

"Just sit with him. Let him know you support him."

So I do. I sit beside Gregory Lin's bed, and hold his hand.

Gregory sleeps at last, and I slip my fingers from his, intending to go find coffee for the sustenance of my vigil. His eyes flutter open. His voice is sad. "How, Professor Naidu? How can you do it?"

I look upon him, this frail sample of my species, broken by contact with the void and its creatures. I don't know if I can tell him how much comfort I take in the thought of a day, thirty-three hundred years in the future, when humanity's art will return to Earth, when the world will receive back monuments and treasures that would surely have been destroyed in the intervening time.

I bend to kiss his temple and to whisper in his ear a secret that I know. "Not all that is sacrificed is lost."

And I go for the coffee I promised myself, and return for the vigil I promised to him.

He turns tear-shining eyes upon me at my return. "Not all that is lost is sacrificed, Professor. Some things are stolen."

"You were no more stolen than I, Gregory. We led ourselves down this path." It's not the right thing to say, of course; I never was much good at that. He turns his face away from me, but still I sit beside him, hoping that my presence helps where my words have failed.

When the day turns, I will return to Earth, return to the sacrifices I must make there. For my own sake, I will not think about Gregory, or think too long on the sacrifices we will make to our conquerors from the stars. ○

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—Kendall Evans and David C. Kopaska-Merkel

Nick Wolven attended the 2007 Clarion workshop in San Diego. He lives in New York City, where he works in the library at Barnard College. In his first professional sale, the digital future turns every aspect of life and death into . . .

# AN ART, LIKE EVERYTHING ELSE

Nick Wolven

**D**ominic appeared again on Tuesday night. It was like the other times. Tim woke to distant muttering and the sound of slamming drawers. The hall light was on and a stripe of yellow light sliced the bed. He threw back the covers and lay still for a long time, trying not to hear a thing, trying not to know what was happening. Then he got up and went down the hall.

The living room was a mess. The drawers of the ebony desk juttied open, spilling papers and wires. The file cabinet in the corner had been disem-boweled, and multicolored folders lay strewn on the carpet. On the glass-topped coffee table, diverse media stood in awkward piles, colored jewel cases mingled with disks and envelopes, open notebooks biting reels of magnetic tape. Dominic sat on the sofa with his elbows on his knees, his chin propped on his hands.

"What time is it?" he said.

Tim looked at the dark windows, said what he always said. "Time for sleep."

"You know, I just don't understand it." Dominic spread his hands above the mess. "I know I saw it recently. I know we have it somewhere. A book, leather cover, oxblood, like a photo album. I can remember holding it in my hands. I can smell the binding, the paper. But I can't, for the life of me, remember where I put it." He glanced at Tim over his shoulder. "I've looked everywhere. It's gone."

Tim stood on the far side of the room, holding the back of a chair.

"And it's not just that." Dominic shook his head. "The plans, the forms: I can't find those, either. And when I try to sort things out, there's just this empty space. A void in my head. I try to think of yesterday, and I

can't come up with a thing." He looked at the gray carpet, the modernist furniture, the bare white walls of Tim's house. "I don't even remember this place, this room."

Tim squeezed the back of the chair. "It's all right. We don't need the book. We don't need to worry about those forms anymore."

"But I *want* the book," Dominic struck his knee. "I want . . . I want to know what I'm leaving." He rubbed his legs, trying ineffectually to smoothe the folds in his khakis, the sofa's leather upholstery creaking as he shifted his weight. "And we have them, I know we do. The recordings from France. The one of that sunset over the volcanoes. The time we went to Texas and saw the Smoking Mirror dance. I remember looking through them, I can still see it perfectly. Those colored feathers, the Tres Leches in little bowls. I can see you standing under the acacia trees, stamping your foot to the beat."

"And that's good," said Tim, trying to sound calm. "You remember it, see? Isn't that good enough? I don't think we need those recordings anymore."

"But that's not how it was supposed to be." Dominic rose and came around the sofa. As always, it was striking to Tim how physical he was, how substantive. His feet depressed the carpet and rustled papers on the floor. His bulk and motion sent currents through the air. It was strange how little you noticed these things as a matter of course, the vibrations of air and the response of a carpet, the subliminal indications of a body filling space. They played upon your skin and ears like music, like a catchy tune humming in the back rooms of the mind.

And then of course there was the touch itself, skin on skin, Dominic's palm on the back of his neck. Every hair on his head was alert to it, and his chest seemed to empty suddenly, as though a spell had sent his heart to another, stranger dimension. He felt himself give in as Dominic's T-shirt pressed his cheek—give in, and begin to believe.

"We were going to run our sleighing sim," Dominic said into Tim's hair. "Take that road up into the mountains, to the lodge. Make hot chocolate with Bailey's, make a fire. Use those pine cones that paint little pictures as they burn. Then turn on the snowfall, sit on the couch—just watch the world disappear. And we were going to take out that big leather album, go through it: all our recordings, all the best moments we ever had." His chest began to shake against Tim's cheek. "I thought it would help me, you know? To have that ending."

Tim put his arms around Dominic's body, amazed by the warmth, the comfort, the weight. "It did," he said. Then more softly, "I thought it did."

Tim had chosen to be fairly tall, a shade above six feet, with a quick-growing beard and a face just beginning to weather. But he always felt like a boy against Dominic's big chest. He nuzzled the T-shirt, stroked the broad back, felt Dominic's beard catch at his hair.

"I'm so confused," Dominic sighed.

"I'm sorry," said Tim, and narrowed his eyes.

The room shook, slid. The desk collapsed, the sofa receded. The windows expanded, opening on new scenes. Tim packed up the room like a set of clothes, slipped it into a folder under the world. He bit his lip, con-

centrating. The scene became a beach. Their feet sank into coral sand; sun stung their cheeks.

"What was that for?" Dominic said.

Tim shook his head. He searched memories, files, scenes. He changed the beach to New York, and New York to taiga forest. He changed the forest to a bungalow on the coast of Nauru.

"What are you doing?" Dominic said. "It's late. Honey? Why are you changing the sim like this?"

Tim didn't answer. It was hard enough to switch sims while he was groggy from sleep; it was even harder when Dominic's deep voice stroked his mind, drawing his thoughts down from the surface of things. He forced himself to be acute, intellectual, to sort the links and directories in his mind.

"Is something wrong?" Dominic pushed away, stroking Tim's cheek with his fingertips. "You all right?"

The world shuffled madly: a patio, Greek ruins. A garden of heliconias, air plants, bromeliads. Dominic towered before the scenes, an eternal pillar, lips pursed in perplexity. Tim turned away. There was always some moment . . .

It happened. He felt a lurch. Some alien hand seemed to turn a screw in his brain. He felt his consciousness tugged sideways, and the lodge came into being. He heard the crackle of a fire and inhaled the spice of smoke. He opened his eyes fully on the pine-paneled scene. There was the big sandstone fireplace, the coffee table made of a single redwood slab. Hot chocolate simmered in a red pot on a stove. The walls were hung with oil paintings of cedars and glittering streams. And there was the feather-stuffed couch where he and Dominic had first embraced, tasting cider on each other's lips, first truly fallen in love.

Dominic backed into the scene. He turned in a slow circle, put his hands on the couch, wearing the vague expression of a child in a strange person's house. "Are we here already?" He frowned. A patchwork quilt lay on the back of the couch, and he fingered the corner of it as though examining a plant. "How did we get here?"

Tim cleared his throat. "Don't you remember, hon?"

"Did we take the sleigh? We must have taken the sleigh." Dominic wandered around the couch, sat. "I really don't remember. I don't remember anything." His eye fell on the coffee table. "Oh—but here's our book!" He took the album into his lap, stroked the oxblood cover. "Are we doing this already? Is it already time?"

"It's time," Tim said. And he blinked away the scene.

It was jarring, sickening, ending a sim so fast. One moment the firelight was flickering around him, Dominic was watching him with uncertain eyes. Then the scene became mud, an inchoate space. He swam through mental static, through pieces of existence. And he found his way, lurching like a diver low on air, to the mess in his living room, to his empty house.

He knelt among the scattered papers, remembering to breathe. He pressed the carpet with his hands and concentrated on the realness of things, the physicality, the way the tufted fibers gave beneath his weight.



Slowly, he raised his head and scanned the room, confirming that he was alone.

"He came again. Last night."

Tim spoke before he sat. He stood in the center of the Executor's office, casting his gaze abstractedly over the wainscoted walls, the oak desk, the burgundy armchairs with their bloated cushions. The Executor's office always made him uncomfortable. It aspired to an awkward balance of refinement and informality. There were massive walnut bookcases around the room, but the low-pile carpet had a colorful pattern and the framed posters on the walls touted slogans of studied banality. *A flower blooms where a tree has died. A mountain grows and dies, but never in a day. A tree only falls if someone chooses to listen.* "I tried to focus. I changed the scene over and over. But he was so . . . present. He touched my neck."

"You have to remember," the Executor said, "that Dominic is not a ghost. Dominic is as real as you and I. I call him a ghost because it suits our purposes. But the analogy is a fragile one, at best."

There were two singular things about the Executor: his size and his clothes. He was a towering man, with a bald oblong head and overlarge hands. He wore black wool suits that seemed a size or three too small. His wrists and ankles jutted from the garments like bones from a piece of meat.

"We use the metaphors of the former world," the Executor said, "to describe our own. A ghost is one of those metaphors. It seems to capture the problem you face. But the word comes from a time before The Transition. It assumes a different kind of physical reality. It assumes a reality that we are given, one over which we have little control."

"A body," Tim said. "A corpus. I know."

"That's part of it. But we make our own reality. With programs, with patterns, with information. We make our own bodies, too, by controlling that information. Our reality is not a ground, it's a screen. We can project whatever we like. But those projections are still very real."

"I know that," said Tim, sinking into a chair. "But I thought we destroyed the projections. Isn't that what you said?"

The Executor sat on his desk and crossed his legs. He wrapped one knee with his massive hands. "I did. I tried. But you have to appreciate the magnitude of the task. Information is a fluid thing. It flows and changes. By nature, it reproduces. I can track down and delete Dominic's official identity. I can stop the programs and processes that make up his life. But I can't guarantee to you that I've expunged him entirely, because information is simply too difficult to control. As long as someone is looking for Dominic, expecting to see him there . . . as long as someone is still accessing the data that remain . . . you have to understand this, Tim: Dominic will still exist. In a broken, incomplete way, yes. But he's still alive."

"But I don't want to access his data," Tim said. "I don't want to look. I just wake up, and I find him there. And he remembers things, sometimes—things even I don't know. He thinks, he reacts, he gets upset. He gets so frustrated, and I can't help. And then he touches me and looks at me as if he still . . . as if he . . ." He jerked forward, resting his hands on his knees. "I don't want him to be alive. I don't, I really don't."

The Executor watched Tim silently. He removed one vast hand from his knee, and stroked his chin.

Tim took a train home from the Executor's office. It was a foolish decision, fond and uneconomical. He had work to do at home; he should have simply flipped the sim. But he liked the illusion of travel, sometimes. It gave him a chance to think.

He walked to the station over elm-shaded sidewalks, scrolling through streets at a casual pace. It was so odd. He never really thought about the state of the world much: the way it worked, the issues it raised. Two children in a nearby yard had discovered secret features built into their lawn sprinkler, and now they were conjuring misty horses from the spray, making water droplets roll like marbles on the air. A figure strolled by in a shadowy cocoon, wrapped in its own private nighttime. If Tim concentrated, he himself could change certain features of the public street, switch the languages on signs or make dandelions bloom at the curb. And the people who walked behind him undid what he had done, turned the languages back or turned the dandelions to crocuses, made their own small modifications to the scene.

He thought back to arguments his parents used to have. They were first generation: they had gone through the Transition. Tim's mother had found it much easier than his father. Every time they made a change to their home sim, his father made the same complaints.

"I don't understand this world. It's out of control."

"It's not out of control," Tim's mother would sigh.

"But it is. Anything could happen. What's to keep a leprechaun from jumping out of my ear, right this moment?"

"People used to say those things about the old world, too. Reality has always been a social construct."

"Not like this."

Then Tim's mother would explain about maps and mods and semiotics and conventional rule systems, and describe how the important rules of reality had been laid down in advance, just like before, while the changes people made on a daily basis were as trivial and innocuous as repainting a bathroom, or negotiating right-of-way in a city intersection, or changing channels on an old TV. "They built this world to be like the old one, but with more options. If you want a leprechaun to pop out of your ear, you can pay someone to make that happen. But it's not going to happen just by accident."

Tim had always thought of his mother as the sensible one. Sure, the world was a "negotiated reality," as his mother's friends said, a "product of controlled perception." But that didn't mean the world was senseless. It always made sense for Tim.

Almost always, at least.

One time, when he was six, he had suffered a breakdown of sorts—his mother called it a "bug," his father a "nightmare." Tim didn't have a word for it, but he remembered the incident clearly. A thing with long fingers had wriggled above his bed; the walls had warped out and puckered as though sucked by an unseen mouth; the sweat in his sheets had formed

puddles and streams, crawled in liquid worms back through his skin. He bleated in fear, and his parents dashed into the room. They saw what was happening, and Tim's father screamed—actually screamed. But his mother fumbled in the nightstand for a folded card, muttering about overrides and emergencies. She spoke strange words, and the horrors subsided; and then she drew the toy chest up to Tim's bed and sat there for hours, resting a cool palm on his forehead.

"You see?" Tim's father said from the door. "There's your product of controlled perception."

That was the only time Tim could recall when his mind had not been his own.

Until now.

He watched a brick wall beside him dissolve gradually into daffodils as a nearby-property owner revised his lawn. Reality had seemed an easy game—until he started seeing ghosts.

The train he selected was an old-fashioned model, a coal-eating beast with carriages of red carmine. Enthusiasts in Victorian garb flocked about the locomotive, brushing down the red running gear and filling the water tank from a hose. Tim bought a ticket from a man in a booth detailed with gingerbread trim and crossed the slate platform. His compartment had mahogany paneling, seats upholstered in wine-red mohair. Minutes after he sat, the train lurched forward with a whistle, rocking gently on the narrow tracks.

He leaned against the window, watched green hills tumble by. The wheels clacked in a cycling rhythm, measuring out bits of time.

He had first met Dominic on a construction job, building new terrain for a corporate vacation sim. At a youthful forty-six, Tim was in the creative unit, allowed to learn and play, innovate, experiment. Dominic, middle-aged at eighty-two, had just been moved to supervision. He loomed over the sandbox as the new recruits received their tools, an immense dark figure with a beard that could have scrubbed pots. But when he spoke to his trainees, his voice was soft as dovesong, a low music that stroked the ear.

"Welcome to Kalam Constructions. Today you'll learn how to build a world."

He showed Tim how to sculpt basic terrain, laying down the layers of rock and choosing soil types. This was nitty-gritty work, much more involved than switching sims or tweaking the settings of one's property. They knelt together by the sandbox, working with trowels at the pliant earth, rolling the soil mixture into dells and hills. They cut rocks with their chisels and contrived sharp sierras, lining up the stones like dominoes. The sim was for hiking vacations, and the requirements specified uneven land and lookouts, little touches that people could discover and enjoy. They dug caves and tunnels, sliced cliffs like cheese, balanced boulders.

"You're creative, all right," Dominic said, after they'd been working a half hour in silence. "I love this little rock palace, in the corner over here. But you need to vary these things with even stretches, normal land. It

sets off the thrill of discovery. Here." He leaned over the box, resting his palm on a slab of pink granite. "You can make whole valleys with one cut, just turning your wrist. The rocks will pick up texture from your movements. Watch." He dug the trowel in and carved a valley, twisting the blade to texture the sides.

He put the trowel in Tim's hand. "It gives you a natural look. And it's easy. Here, let's try." They cut a valley together, turning the blade as one mind, watching the world take shape beneath their palms. When the valley was complete, they still held the trowel, their fingers intertwined above the country they had made.

"That's amazing," said Tim. He grinned and looked up in surprise, found himself meeting Dominic's eyes. They looked at each other awkwardly for a moment, unspoken words putting weight on the gaze they shared. Then Dominic grinned also, patted Tim's shoulder.

"It was all you," he said in his soft song of a voice. "I'm just along for the ride."

The ride lasted for sixty years.

They found themselves meeting after work, discussing technique in a Turkish cafe. Dominic reminisced about his former jobs. He'd done social planning for thirty years, solving statistical puzzles and managing schedules. Among other things, he'd been responsible for coordinating train routes among three hundred different sims. Then he talked about a season he had spent in WreckTech, writing decay scripts for vacant environments.

"It's a craft," he said, "a skill. Dying, that is. When a tree dies, it can't just sit there, frozen. It's got to follow certain processes, certain expectations. I guess what I'm saying is: dying's its own kind of life."

He grew wistful then, resting his chin on spread fingers, watching smoke from the hookahs curl among the lamps. Tim gazed at the dark, pensive face—the way the beard curled around the soft line of the jaw, the deep-set eyes, the smooth skin shining in the lamplight—and realized, all at once, that it was beautiful.

They dated for weeks that seemed like years, sampling the usual diversions: water-skiing, hiking, reproductions of Mayan sites; a string of bars that seemed to go on forever, doses of Stoli blurring the lights. Before long, they happened on the sleighing sim.

It was a fluke. Dominic had meant to load a jungle scene. Suddenly they found themselves ankle-deep in snow. They thrashed through the scene in their khaki shorts, kicking up white bursts, laughing and cursing. "What the hell?" Dominic hugged himself. "What happened to Meroe?"

"It's a bad reference, I guess," said Tim, rubbing his arms. "Someone hasn't been updating his directories."

They could have left right then, but the whole thing seemed so funny: their tropical attire absurd among the bright heaps of snow. They couldn't just dismiss it; the joke had to be played through. They tromped up a dirt lane, shivering and clacking their teeth. "I hope this isn't an adventure

sim," said Tim, surveying the pine forest surrounding them. "It looks so wild, so remote. We could get eaten by a white dragon at any moment."

"I don't think so. It's not pleasant enough." Dominic cleaned a crust of snow from his sock. "Adventure sims are paper thin, and this is detailed. A work of love."

The sleigh stood at the end of the lane in a clearing: a berry-red splash against the snow. A roan horse stamped and snorted in a harness clustered with bells. They spotted a plaid blanket and leapt into the vehicle, drawing the fabric over their bare knees. Dominic found a jug of hot cider under the seat.

As soon as they were settled, the horse set off along a snowy road, a track that swooped and wound among the hills. Pine boughs rushed by and the runners hissed like steam. Fresh powder, fine as sea froth, puffed from the horse's hooves. They drank their cider from tin tankards with little hinged caps, laughed in delight when snow dusted down from the branches. "I wonder what we'll find," Dominic said, "at the end of the road?"

They found a cabin, perched high in the forested hills, with a gabled roof so high and snowy the structure looked like a white tent. The sleigh stopped by the door and they leapt out into the chill. Inside, the cabin bore signs of being well advanced along one of Dominic's artful decay scripts. The floors were dusty and cobwebs blew from the ceiling. The patchwork quilt on the couch had been ravaged by moths.

"I bet no one even knows about this place," Dominic said, wandering with echoing footsteps through the room. "It got lost in the directories, and no one's been here in years. We could fix it up together, have it restored."

"It's clearly a work of art," Tim said, "not some chintzy sim. I bet there are secrets hidden in the scene." He found a crooked painting of a forest on the wall. When he adjusted it, snow fell in the painting, a flake-white static over Impressionist trees. When he went to the window, snow was falling outside. He watched the descending curtain of flakes with satisfaction. "There we go."

Dominic came to his side and they looked over the room. In the years to come they would learn all its secrets: a way to adjust the thickness of the snowfall, a way to order food, a store of wood for the fire. They would find the colored pinecones that painted scenes in the air when burned. They would find the leather-bound album, an empty database of creamy blank pages, and use it to store recordings of the moments they wished to remember. But nothing would ever compare to this first moment, when they hugged each other, reviewing the dusty room, and first realized what it meant to have a permanent place of retreat, a private refuge, a shared home.

The green hills rolled by, and the wheels ticked off pieces of time. Tim turned away from the window, and found Dominic beside him.

Dominic was dressed in jeans and a yellow jacquard shirt. He jerked as though waking suddenly. "What just happened?"

"I don't know," Tim said. He checked his surroundings furtively: the

window, the green landscape outside, the varnished walls of the train compartment. Dominic had never appeared in public before. "What . . . what do you think happened?"

Dominic twisted in his seat. "Are we on a train?"

Tim reached for him, but Dominic stood up swiftly.

"I hate trains. You know that." He threw open the door of their compartment.

"Dominic—"

The train rocked with sudden severity. They staggered as they entered the corridor, bumping the walls.

"What are we even doing here?" Dominic said. He stumbled down the corridor, throwing out his arms for balance, pawing at the doors of the other compartments. "How did we get here? Tim, I hate trains, I hate travel, you know that!"

"Honey, it's okay." Tim caught up to him with a leap, putting a hand on his back, stroking him clumsily. Dominic turned and braced himself on the walls with outstretched arms.

"We're not supposed to be here. I had something I needed to do."

"No, Dom. No, it's fine. There's nothing. Really, you don't have to do anything. Just—" Tim held out a hand, struggling to keep his voice steady. "Come here."

Dominic turned his head frantically. Other passengers were sliding the doors of compartments partway open, peeking into the corridor.

"No, I have to be somewhere." Dominic turned away suddenly. "This is wrong, all this is wrong!"

He dashed away, careening down the corridor, his sneakers thumping on the carpeted floor. Tim, with a meaningless shout, flew after. A little stairwell at the end of the corridor led to an exit in the side of the car. Dominic barreled into the stairwell and stood at the doors, wide-eyed and slack-jawed like a panicking child. Tim jammed himself a moment later into the narrow space. Through a window in the mahogany they saw the countryside rush by. Dominic put his hands to the glass and shut his eyes. The stream of hills flowed faster; the land undulated frantically. The hills gave way to waves and the waves to sand. The train screamed through land after land, through tunnels, through cities. Someone in the car behind them shouted; a bell rang. A conductor appeared suddenly, sliding into existence with a creak of invisible hinges, the whisper and slam of a nonexistent door. "You! Sir? What's this? What's he doing?"

"It's all right." Tim wheeled. "He's just upset. He's confused."

"Well, he's hijacked the schedule. He's taken us off course; we're on a completely different route now. Other people have destinations to reach, you know."

"I know. But he's not . . . You have to understand, he's never done this before. He only comes to my house, he doesn't know what he's doing. He's not even really—"

The door flew open suddenly, and Dominic dropped from the car.

Tim spun and launched himself through the exit. "Dominic!" He landed in snow. A pine forest flashed past him as he ran through the cold drifts, chasing after the receding yellow shirt. Needles whisked his face, and the



chilly air bit his skin. They ran to the lane, up the lane to the clearing. Dominic slowed when he saw the sled.

He wobbled toward it, holding out a hand, his lips trembling. Tim drew up beside him, gasping for breath.

"This place," Dominic said. "It's our spot. I remember. I remember all these things so well: this sled, these trees."

"That's right. It's our spot. You're right, honey." Tim found Dominic's hand, squeezed it, rubbed his back.

"I keep forgetting so much. Forgetting what I'm doing. I try to hold on, but it always slips away." Tears like melted snowflakes appeared on Dominic's cheeks. "I wish I could just remember. Remember why I'm here."

He put a hand on the sled, stroking the lacquered wood. His fingers fell to the blanket inside. The horse stamped, and the harness bells shivered and rang. Dominic said, "Oh." The sound was a long low note, half exclamation and half sigh, a low sound floating like dovesong past the ear. He turned to Tim, and his face had changed.

Dominic said softly, "There it is."

Tim backed away, stumbling in the snow.

"It's time," said Dominic.

"No," Tim said.

"Our book. Our memories. I remember now."

"No." Tim sobbed. "We did it all. We've been through this. We did it all, honey; we're done, we're done . . ."

His body tightened around his voice, and no more words would come. He clenched his teeth, shook his head. *We're through*, he thought desperately. *We shouldn't have to do this anymore.*

The ground beneath him bucked and tipped, scurried away from his feet. He could feel the sky turning above him like a gear, the omnipresent vibrations of the shifting world. He put out his hands as though to block an attack. They met a soft plain, sank into tufted fiber. He leaned forward, then realized he was tumbling, falling. Panic flung open his eyes. He thrashed, kicked, stirring papers and folders. Then he stopped suddenly and remembered to breathe.

He lay on the floor in his living room, alone.

"It's what I keep telling you," the Executor said. He held out a hand, inviting Tim to precede him down the path. They walked on a brick lane between blossoming cherry trees. The Executor had decided that Tim's case demanded special attention. It was nothing to be ashamed of, he explained; just an ordinary trouble that many people had. Some clients needed a little extra help.

"I've done what I can." The Executor touched Tim's elbow, a gesture that mixed authority and support. "I've stopped Dominic's . . . key processes. But things just aren't that simple." They left the cherry trees and entered a circular clearing. A stone fountain dribbled among red and white roses. The Executor indicated a stone bench, and they sat.

"You've lived with Dominic, loved him, been loved by him, for six decades. A part of him has literally become a part of you. Now, I could access your life and try to excise that part. But it's a monstrous and de-



structive procedure. It affects more than just your memory. It affects the world you and Dominic built together."

"Do it anyway," Tim said.

The Executor sighed. His hands enveloped his knees. "That's foolish, Tim. I'm not ready to give up." He leaned over and picked a rose from the plot surrounding the fountain. In the bright garden his long black sleeve, a rectangle stretching darkly across the scene, had the absurd incongruity of a censored image. "The mind has its own rules, its own design. It has to be accepted for what it is. It has to be—dare I say it?—treated with respect." He plucked petals from the rose with deft pecks of his finger and thumb, spinning the flower by the stem. "There must be an event, a signal, an act. A way for you to see him go. An illusion that makes the reality complete."

The rose was denuded. He laid the stem on the bench.

"I know that," said Tim. "But it seems so absurd. You already made it happen. Everything. We went through it; it's been done. I mean, what more can the world *want* from me?"

The Executor nodded slowly. He lifted one great hand, let it hang in the air. It descended like a leaf onto Tim's shoulder.

"People had it easy, in the old days," he said. "A death simply happened to them. We have to create one."

Tim prepared for bed slowly, laying out the next day's clothes with fastidious care, switching the pattern of the sheets on the bed, meditating at the window to prepare his mind for sleep. He had set the nightfall on his property to begin automatically at eight o'clock, but this evening he delayed the setting of his private sun, holding a red glow above the horizon, pushing the stars back into the sky. When he finally went to bed, he didn't fall asleep immediately. He lay still, and thought.

Dominic had decided to die in September.

He was old: a hundred and forty-three years. It was surreal, that number; Dominic still looked the same. His black beard bristled from a forty-something face; his eyes were bright and his teeth were strong. But the signs had appeared, and they were quickly getting worse. In many ways, he had already begun to die.

It was frustrating, mysterious, but it happened to everyone. The mind went swiftly and irrevocably stale. New experiences no longer enticed, old memories no longer surfaced. Dominic disappeared into a maze of strict routines. He woke every morning at precisely the same time, structured every day down to the minute. If change disturbed his schedule, he panicked, wept. He needed to have the bed made just so, his bagel buttered just so; he needed sandwiches ordered from the same shop every day. Eventually he limited his diet to bread and bananas; other foods had no taste for him, he said. The truth was clear, but unspoken: he'd forgotten how to taste them.

He refused to travel: it confused him, made him forget his home. He never read, never watched films, never remembered new people. Tim came home once to find him in an armchair in the dark, Mozart's twenty-

fifth concerto filling the room. Dominic played the piece all night, all through the next day. Tim checked the counter surreptitiously, late that evening. The song had played, in total, three hundred times in a week, a thousand times in the previous month.

"Don't you get tired," he said, "of the same piece?"

But Dominic only shushed him.

At last they couldn't avoid the truth, couldn't pretend anymore. Dominic made roast chicken he could no longer taste, bought wine he no longer enjoyed. He prepared a dinner table set with Japanese plates and glasses, silver cutlery and candles—a break from his strict routines. He said, "I've been thinking things over," and Tim began to cry.

They debated, fought, endured long silences. But it had to be done. Dominic signed the termination forms on his provenance and history, wrote his will, approved the handling of his backup records. They planned their last night: the sleigh ride, the cabin. Too soon, they sat on the feather-stuffed couch before the fire, watching pictures of sailing ships and mermaids rise from burning pinecones on the grate.

Dominic searched for Tim's hand beneath the quilt. "It's time," he said.

And Tim slipped. He didn't mean to. He only closed his eyes. But the scene crashed and broke around him like a wave. He felt the structure of it swirl into confusion around his head, fragments of existence cutting at his cheeks. He stood, staggered. But there was nothing to stagger toward. He felt himself plunge, rise; then he was standing on a patch of life, a white island in a sea of void. He crouched, reached down, felt snow on his fingers. Slowly he reconstructed the world, the snowfield flickering into being like a mad puzzle, the trees sidling up out of empty space. Ripples of detail ran out from his feet, shadows and sparkles appeared in the snow, needles emerged from the green blur of the forest. He saw the cabin in front of him, and opened the door.

The fire spat and crackled. Two empty mugs sat on the coffee table. The leather-bound album lay open on the floor.

He crossed the room slowly. The couch was empty. Only a warm depression in the cushions indicated how recently it had been occupied.

He felt his knees tremble, giving out beneath him. Relief shuddered through him, and he groped for a chair. He sat, breathing deeply, focusing on his body: the realness of it, the immediacy, the comfort of ancient physical processes. His breathing slowed, grew even; he felt his head clear, felt the relief grow real.

He had missed it. He'd been spared. The whole scene had happened and concluded, had been resolved; and he hadn't needed to watch a single moment. It was over, really over. Dominic was gone.

Tim woke suddenly, kicked away the sheets, listened to the darkness as his consciousness coalesced. He heard no distant movement, no sound of slamming drawers. He was just about to turn on the light and find a book when a voice murmured beside him in the bed.

"Where am I? What's happening?"

"Dominic?" Tim said.

"Tim? Where are you?"

Tim breathed deeply, swallowed. He put out a hand. Cool sheets brushed his palm. The other side of the bed was empty.

"I keep feeling," Dominic's voice said, "like I forgot to do something. You know that feeling? Like when you have a stressful dream? And you wake up, and can't remember it, but it sticks with you anyway? But then I think back, and it's all vague and dark. I just keep thinking that I need to be with you." He was silent for a moment. "Where am I now?"

"You're with me," Tim said.

He heard Dominic sigh. Tim closed his eyes, concentrating. After a moment, he felt the world shift. It was easy, this time, brief and natural as a breath. When he opened his eyes, he was in the cabin, and Dominic sat beside him on the couch.

"Ah," said Dominic quietly. "Here we are." He reached toward the coffee table. "And—look. Here's our book."

The album fell open with a whisper in his lap. He turned the pages, smiling, and scenes bloomed on the creamy paper. Tim saw their life together dance by in a flutter of moments. "Remember?" Dominic said in his low and musical voice. "That bridge in Paris? The river below? This doesn't do it justice. The sun was different, somehow." He held a block of pages with his thumb, let them slip free one by one. "And here's that café. Those terrible chairs. You looked much more handsome, I remember, in real life. It's weird. Even these perfect recordings—there's something they never catch. Something about a scene when it's really new, when you come to it at that time in your life. The air, the sound of the water, the way little things come together . . . I felt things for you, that day, I'd never felt before." He closed the book. "I guess no recording will ever capture that."

"I remember it," Tim said. "How it felt. All of it."

Dominic reached for Tim's hand—his fingers were warm and tense. The fire settled with a cough. Big snowflakes tapped the windows. They sat quietly as spirits, barely touching hands.

"It's time now, isn't it?" Dominic said.

Tim shook his head.

"Oh, honey, don't cry. We planned this all out. I'm just tired, I'm so tired. I'm tired of having to remember everything."

"But . . ." Tim fought for control of his voice. "You and me."

"I know. But it's time to stop. We have our book, you'll always have that. And I'm just worn out." Dominic's voice faltered. He patted Tim's hand. "Turn up the snowfall," he said.

Tim went to the painting on the wall, held out his hand. He blew across his palm at the gray painted sky, and the flurry of white flakes in the scene grew wilder. Outside the window, a sudden wind moaned. The flakes that tapped the windowpanes grew thicker, multiplied.

"Why don't you make some hot chocolate?" Dominic said.

The red pot was already warming on the stove. The rich drink inside it had just begun to bubble. Tim turned off the heat, poured two mugs, and opened the cupboard. He was startled to see the little bottle sitting inside. It was foolish to be surprised, after all their plans and decisions. Even so, his hand shook as he took the bottle from the shelf, poured the white powder it contained into Dominic's mug.

"Come here," Dominic said, and patted the couch.

Tim set the two mugs on the table, sank to the cushions. Dominic sipped thoughtfully. "Drink it, hon. It came out good."

"I can't."

"It tastes wonderful."

"I really can't."

Dominic finished his mug and sat back. He shifted on the cushions, laid his head in Tim's lap. "You know, everything's perfect. This is just how I wanted it. I've been feeling so lost, so confused, for so long. But now I don't feel that way anymore."

Tim passed his fingers through Dominic's hair, feeling the fineness, the realness of the strands. "I'm so sorry, hon. I knew what I had to do. I just lost control; I just slipped away. I've never had that happen, not since I was a kid. But I couldn't watch you go. I tried, I really did."

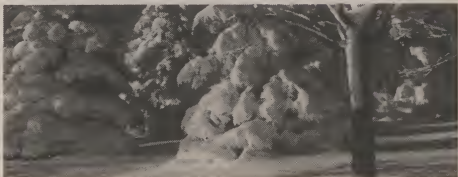
"It's gentle, you know," said Dominic. "It doesn't hurt." He had his eyes closed, and was breathing through his mouth.

"I know. But to see it, to see you really go . . . It broke the whole world for me, it made everything come apart. It was as if . . . as if suddenly I just disappeared. I was in this dark place, this big empty void. I guess I really couldn't believe in a world without you." Tim rested a hand on Dominic's cheek. "That must have been where you were: that empty place. And I sent you there, because I couldn't stand to see it. Because a part of me refused to watch you go away." Tim leaned forward. "Honey? Can you hear me?"

Dominic took Tim's hand, held it to his chest. He breathed deeply and slowly. "I'm glad you're here with me."

The snowflakes whispered against the window glass, and the fire spoke to itself in snaps and pops. Tim lifted his head and passed his eyes over the room. He imagined the ceiling strewn with cobwebs, dust making specters of the wooden furniture. He imagined the paintings cracked with age, the cabinets warped and the fire defunct. He imagined the coffee table bare, the quilt ruined, the empty couch leaking feathers through broken threads.

He eased out from under Dominic's head, lowering it gently with his palms. He stroked the hairs a last time, and the still-warm cheeks; and he unfolded the quilt and spread it over the couch. From the coffee table, he picked up the leather-bound album, tucking it under his arm. Then he went to the window to watch the thickening snowfall, the countless flakes that were slowly erasing the world. ○



# AN ALIEN HERESY

S.P. Somtow

S.P. Somtow was born in Thailand, grew up in Europe, and had a career in music in the 1970s before emigrating to America. "A Day in Mallworld," his first story for *Asimov's* (as Somtow Sucharitkul), appeared in our October 1979 issue. After numerous stories for us, he tells us he "graduated to fantasy, horror, and historical novels; went off to a monastery in Thailand; reemerged as a composer of operas; and founded the Bangkok Opera." Although he has been very busy writing and premiering grand operas, he found he'd hit a fiction writer's block that lasted for seven years. That dry spell broke suddenly with the penning of "An Alien Heresy." This science fiction story offers the reader an intensely disconcerting look at a medieval inquisitor's reaction to the unknown.

A word of warning: there are scenes in this story  
that may be disturbing to some readers.

*I am not a heretic. I am a being from another world. I am lost. Send me home, I beg you.*

**Y**ou may say I am young to be an inquisitor, but in my brief existence in this world I have not remained unexposed to evil. For, in the Fourteen Hundred and Fortieth Year of Our Lord, I was a novice in the service of the Bishop of Nantes, and because I could scribe a fair round cursive hand, I was often called upon to set down confessions of such horror that it is hard to think of them even years later without a shudder; I mean

revelations of deviltry, sorcery, and heresy as would awaken doubt in the stoutest believer, and drive the purest of souls into the abyss of despair.

Thanks to that legible hand, I was appointed one of the scribes at the trial of Gilles de Rais, called Bluebeard, and I was compelled to write down, dispassionately and accurately, descriptions of the mutilation of small children, onanistic rituals, and perversions I had never even imagined. And when at last the Marshall of France came to be burned at the stake, I was asked to expunge some of the more lurid details from the record, for fear that the truth might give too much distress to future generations; and so my much-vaunted penmanship proved to be mere *vanitas*. What was torn from the pages, however, could not be expunged from our souls. We were scarred by it, and it still gives us nightmares.

Yet even that infamous trial could not prepare me for my encounter with the lost soul who claimed to have come from another world. It was only through the sternest self-discipline that I managed to survive the interrogation with my soul, to all appearances, intact.

The Gilles de Rais case was a dozen years ago, and now I was returning to Tiffauges, that cursed place where Bluebeard perpetrated his crimes. I was to investigate a new incident. It was a simple, open-and-shut case, just the kind of thing a junior inquisitor can handle in a week's work. His Grace the Bishop of Nantes used to favor me, and often assigned me such routine cases, which help one to rise in the bureaucracy of the church and are not intellectually taxing.

These were the details: a fire from the sky. A strange man, mud-soaked, naked, seen by the river's edge. A strange man with strange eyes. Perhaps a demon; more likely a natural man, or a village idiot who had wandered back to the wrong village. I was either to quell their superstitions or, if necessary, act as the proper representative of the Church Militant.

Routine indeed. But of course no one wanted to travel to Tiffauges. I could feel the gloom long before I came in sight of the castle. Only three days by oxcart it might have been, but it felt as though I had left the world of men and entered a kingdom of ghosts. Beyond the hamlet of St. Hilaire de Clisson, it seemed that the sky became perpetually gray. Though it was already March, much snow still lay on the ground. The River Crème was still part frozen, and, where it joined the Sèvre Nantaise, which is where the castle stands, ice clanged against ice.

When we arrived in the village, the sun was already going down. We were well stocked with provender, and we had brought all the instruments for the Question with us, in case none could be found locally. Ahead of me rode two knights, or rather a knight and his squire. I had not bothered to find out their names. In the cart with me sat Brother Paolo, a Roman musician and general note-taker, the dour-faced Brother Pierre, and the ever-smiling Jean of Nantes, a genial fellow, by avocation a barber, by trade a torturer. And I, of course, another Jean of Nantes—how many are there, I wonder?—who am called Lenclud.

A few hours behind us marched the secular arm, a small detail of a dozen foot soldiers and a captain on horse; they would reach the village by midnight, perhaps, and would camp in the field.

My traveling companions had been garrulous all through the journey.



Now, in the sunset, they could all feel the oppression in this village. No children played in the one muddy path that ran through the center, where stood a well. The huts were hushed. One, a little larger, seemed to pass for an inn. A bit of light came from within and there had been noise, although the sound of our horses and oxen seemed to still it.

"We should press on," I called out to the knights, our escort. "It's barely one league to the castle."

The chateau had been abandoned since the trial, but it must at least have walls, and a fireplace, and a room in which to conduct interrogations.

"We'll put up in the inn," said the elder of the two.

I had certain reasons for avoiding that, but they were not reasons I could admit. I said, "Sir chevalier, another hour's riding at best will bring us to a place with stone walls; we'll have a roaring fire and we'll be able to sleep in real beds. And not have to pay," I added, for the execution of Gilles de Rais had made his lands temporarily forfeit to the church, until such time as all the rights and papers were sorted out.

"All very well for you to say, *mon père*," said the knight. "But think of us. And my squire's frightened; he's heard the stories."

The younger one turned around and I saw that he was, indeed, younger than I had thought from just seeing the back of his head for three days; but I had to hold to my word, lest authority be lost. It is in our training.

"We're not here to disrupt the village," I said. "The inquisition is not a circus. Let's get to the castle as quickly as possible, set up, and have the case brought to us properly."

"As you wish," said the knight.

But at that moment the inn door flew open. There were faces I knew; the innkeeper, even more grizzled than when last I saw him, some villagers who had given evidence in the matter of the Marshall of France; but I did not yet see the face I most dreaded to see, and so I breathed a sigh of relief. My traveling companions must have mistaken it for relief at seeing that this was not, after all, a village of ghosts.

"Father Lenclud," the innkeeper said, "it's best you came in."

I started to protest, "We are bound for Tiffauges," but he interrupted me. "What you want," he said, "is all in here."

The door opened wider. We saw tables inside, and we could smell a rabbit stew on the pot. There was a smoky light and the air heated up just a little; I could see the others were tired, and perhaps, perhaps the person I wished to avoid was no longer there. After all, it had been ten years; no, twelve. Perhaps I was safe after all. Perhaps she had gone away.

And in the grand scheme of things, it was, perhaps, a smallish sin, for which I had suffered seven painful penances already.

We piled inside, leaving our cart and our belongings unguarded; for who would steal from God? and we were offered benches inside; there were villagers there, and children, too, scurrying in the shadows; the walls were sooty and greasy; but the fire blazed, and the stew was filling.

The innkeeper said nothing while we ate, except to remind me of his name, which was Henri. I learned at supper that our knight was another Jean of Nantes; but this one we called Johan, because he had a Flemish mother.



It was only when we had eaten our fill that Henri was ready to tell us why the villagers had sent a letter to His Grace in Nantes.

"We've got him locked in the cellar," he said.

"And he is well rested, and has eaten?" It is true that we torture people, but we do love them; I never want to begin an investigation with threats and violence; that comes all too soon.

"Yes, he's eaten all right."

"Twelve fish," said a woman from the back. "I counted them myself. Raw. And all the bones. You've never heard such a crunching sound, *mon père*! Frightened out of our wits, we was."

"Bid her come out of the shadows," I said, "she seems to have a lot to say." And I regretted it as soon as I said it, because when she stepped into the light I recognized her, as I should have from the voice.

She knew me too. But she had the courtesy to lower her gaze, and gave no sign of it. In the firelight, in her grubby peasant shift, she was still beautiful, though. I looked longer than I ought to have. I was glad I had remembered to pack the flagellum.

"Your name?" I asked her, already knowing the answer.

"I am Alice, *mon père*. I am the innkeeper's wife."

So she had married. How much did the innkeeper know?

"Alice," I said softly, "tell me about the man in the cellar. If it is indeed a man; I have read the letter to the bishop, but we tend to view reports of devils in the flesh with a degree of cynicism."

The villagers looked at each other. Alice looked at me. Was there a hint of reproach? She did not reveal much. In the void in the conversation, all we could hear was the sizzle from the fireplace.

"Children, come out now," the innkeeper said at last, speaking at the shadows and at the space under the stairs. "The inquisitor won't hurt you."

I realized then what it was that had subdued the noise. It was fear.

"You have to forgive us," Henri said, "they haven't trusted many people since . . . you know."

Three children emerged. One was a little girl with stringy hair, perhaps seven; an older girl, on the cusp of womanhood, her shapeless smock belying an incipient voluptuousness. The two girls curtsied. Then there was the boy. He was perhaps eleven; he had long blonde hair, a dirty face, and clear blue eyes. He seemed so familiar . . . I could not place him . . . he did not look at me at all. But Alice did. At me and him. And in that awkward moment I understood everything, and I knew that her marriage must have been loveless, born from desperation.

"They saw him," the innkeeper said. "They'll tell you."

"We're not to tell him anything," said the boy, defiant. "They're going to burn him at the stake. He's our friend."

"Let the church be the judge of that now, Guillaume," Alice said. Was her voice not edged with cynicism?

"Guillaume, sit by me," I said, with all the gentleness I could muster. "Tell me of your friend." I reached out to touch his cheek. He flinched quite visibly, but overcame it, and sat on the bench. Meanwhile, the musician, the knight, and the torturer were already heavily into their ale. I called for Brother Pierre to take notes.

Guillaume kept his distance from me. I did not yet dare think the unthinkable: that I should acknowledge him, that he should have my name, that I could, in this peasant village, live on; that I had a son.

He said, "I'm sorry about the mud, mon père; that was my idea. Not any of the others'."

I remembered that the strange man was reportedly coated in mud. I waited for him to go on.

"It was a week ago. I wouldn't have seen the fire, but there was this noise, first. It was a rustling sound. I thought it might be a wolf, and we've only the one cow. I took a knife. When I stepped out of our hut it was almost as bright as day. When I looked up it was like the sun was in the sky, only bigger and more blue."

"Our Guillaume is prone to fancifying," the innkeeper said. "You tell mon père the truth now, you hear, don't exaggerate." To me he grumbled, "The boy should have been whelped in a castle, not a hut, the way he carries on."

"Go on, Guillaume."

"I'm not making it up," he said. "I can show you where the fire fell."

"An accursed spot!" said Henri. "No one has gone there save the boy since it happened. A whole circle of forest seared into a blackened clearing. If it isn't the devil's work, I don't know what is."

"Me and my sisters," said Guillaume, "we wanted to keep him as a pet. But someone saw him and denounced us to the inquisition. Are you going to torture him, mon père? Are you going to torture *me*?"

I would have embraced him then and there. But I knew that the pleasure of having him in my arms, the warmth of human love, was not for me; I am married only to Christ. And so I only said, "Guillaume, take me to that place."

"By all the saints!" said the innkeeper. "Can you not burn the demon and be done with it?"

"I'll say this only once," I said. "Please listen. The men of the village could have handled this matter by themselves. They could have clubbed the stranger to death, hacked him up, buried him in an unmarked grave; without a feudal lord nearby, with the village's legal status still under negotiation, such a crime would almost certainly not have been noticed by anyone. But you chose to involve the Church. That was the right and honorable thing to do. But the Church is here now, and things will be done according to procedure. If a trial is necessary it will be a fair trial. If torture is demanded it will be strictly in accordance with the Papal Bull *Ad Exstirpanda*, which set appropriate guidelines over a century ago. If execution is required, it will be carried out by the secular arm in Nantes. We are not barbarians, Henri, and we shall not fall prey to peasant superstitions."

And that, it was to be hoped, was that.

And so I went out again into the cold, not yet having had a moment in private with Alice—for I dreaded that possibility—accompanied by Guillaume, by Brother Paolo, who fears nothing, and Brother Pierre, and by Chevalier Johan and his squire, who held aloft a burning torch.

We entered the woods. Guillaume walked swiftly, knowing the location

of every tree. We reached the clearing in only an hour, and when I stood there, with the bright moon shining down on every charred stalk, and the wind howling, I saw many hallmarks of the devil's work.

For example, the clearing was completely and perfectly circular. No random falling object, no hand of man could have made it so. The snow had melted and refrozen into a glassy shield, from whose center there projected a strange metal artifact. I say metal, but it had a purplish sheen unlike any steel or bronze I had ever looked upon.

Guillaume took me by the hand. "I'll show you the spaceship," he said. "Come, mon père. There's nothing living; it's just twisted metal."

"Spaceship?" said Johan the knight.

"That's the word *he* used," Guillaume said.

He tugged at my hand again, and, all in innocence, he tugged at my heart, too. I followed him, bold as he was, for he knew nothing of the dark powers, and I could not afford to show fear. The artifact was mostly concealed under the ice; we were seeing only the tip of it. It was a thing of delicate needles, of twists and twirls of metal, of gossamer webs no mortal hand could have woven. When I saw it my heart sank, for I knew that whatever was in the cellar of the inn was no lost village idiot. I prayed in my heart to the Blessed Virgin, and there sprang unbidden into my mind the image of Alice, Alice with unbound hair in the spring breeze, Alice of the ample breasts; and I trembled, knowing that the Dark One must have sent me that vision to divert me from my contemplation of all that is immaculate. I knew that tonight I was in for a long session with the knout, and that my hair shirt would be blooded come morning.

Now, I was truly afraid. But the boy was not. These infernal shards were just a new kind of toy for him, and the demon, perhaps, a new kind of pet. That is what it must be like, I thought, to grow up in the shadow of Tiffauges, in a world where evil, hanged and burned at the stake, still would not loose its grip. He bent down, stared at the metal with a natural curiosity, tried to pry the pieces from the ice, but they would not budge.

I looked at the boy, and past him, into the barren trees; beyond them I could see where the two rivers met, and I could see the castle as well; that is how bright the moon was, and how glistening the ice. The wind whistled. The chateau was a black and shapeless mass; one tower had already crumbled. Evil can rot even stone, rot it from within.

"We will turn back," I said curtly. The squire with the torch turned immediately. He sensed it too. Brother Pierre had been taking notes, even sketching the diabolical device on a scrap of vellum.

"Come, mon père," Guillaume said, "I'll take you to him now."

And on the way back to the village, the boy sang, in a hearty voice, the war-song *L'homme armé*, and because we were all afraid of the gathering dark, we followed his lead, and it was a raucous chorus; but as soon as we reentered the village something dampened our spirit and the singing petered out.

But Brother Paolo whispered in my ear, "That boy has a sweet voice, though untrained; one could really make something of it. I'll have him for the morning mass; he will brighten the gloom."

\* \* \*

And so, with the others all fast asleep, or turning in, Guillaume led me down to the cellar. Always, our dour chevalier followed, his hand never leaving his sword-hilt. Brothers Pierre and Paolo had joined our friend the torturer in a room for six. I was to sleep alone.

The lad unlocked the door, lit a few more candles, and showed me what manner of creature had arrived at Tiffauges in a ball of flame.

Completely covered from head to toe in mud, as they said he would be. He was naked, a state permitted only before the Fall of Man. Hunched over, chained to the wall by his ankles. Perhaps this room had served as a holding pen for Gilles de Rais' victims; for they were slender chains, such as might be used to subjugate a child.

Guillaume lit yet more candles, and now I could see the face clearly. The eyes were large and round, haunting, oddly beautiful.

"Len . . . clud," he said. A sweet, small voice. It chilled me.

"Have you ever told it my name?" I said to Guillaume.

"No, mon père. He just knows things. He plucks them from people's heads, I think."

The eyes peered at me. Yes. I could feel something invading my thoughts. An alien presence. I tried to block it by thinking the words of the rosary over and over.

"Are you a demon?" I asked the stranger. When properly bound to answer by an emissary of the Church, a demon must speak the truth; for hell is ever subject to the will of heaven.

Suddenly, images filled my thoughts. I tried reciting the rosary aloud as though to drown them out. There were creatures with goats' horns, forked tails, hideous leering faces. He was answering me after all, in pictures if not in words.

"Stay back, Guillaume! This creature has just shown me . . . terrifying things."

"Mon père," Guillaume said, "he is only showing you what's in your own heart."

"It's a monster!" I cried, and I leaped to shield the child from its gaze.

And it said, "I not a monster."

Tears rolled down its cheeks. They dug great chasms in the mud. And now I could see what lay beneath all that mire. It was something green. The squamous, reptilian skin that was a certain mark of the dark powers.

"My son," I said, "you tried to hide his skin from us?"

"They would have killed him," said Guillaume. "They get frightened easy; they're superstitious."

"There are worse things than death," I said, and more images sprang into my head . . . flames and bright red devil eyes, and I could almost smell the brimstone. "Tomorrow you will douse him with water, and we will see the extent of his monstrosity."

"I am not a monster."

His speech was much clearer than before. Before, he seemed to speak like the village idiot I had once thought him to be; now he had the more sophisticated accent of the city.

Guillaume said, "Mon père, he first learned to talk from us, but now he's getting it from you."

I stared into the monster's eyes and saw within them such a great despair that I knew he must be among those, once blessed by divine light, who were now eternally deprived of the presence of God.

"Perditus es," I said, for I knew that the devil must speak Latin.

"Per-di-tus." *Lost*. I did not know whether he understood, or if he was merely aping me; but then he continued: "Do-mum." He wanted to return home. He had even used the correct accusative of motion towards, so he could not have been simply copying my words.

"Ubi est domus tua?" I asked him where his home might be.

In response, he looked up at the dank ceiling. The candlelight flicked on old grime.

"In caelo," he said softly.

*My home is in the sky.*

Like Lucifer himself, he dared to claim heaven as his patrimony!

The cellar was cold, but the chill I felt was not from natural causes. I called for Chevalier Johan. "Sir Knight," I said, "the secular arm must have arrived by now. You must ride out quickly and tell them not to pitch their tents, but to ride straight to the chateau. They must clean out a few rooms and they must prepare a dungeon, and tell Brother Paolo to asperge the rooms with holy water, and celebrate mass in the chapel at dawn so as to purge the taint that hangs over it and over this village. Tell them to tie the accused up firmly and admit him there as the Church's ward. Ask them to clean the mud from the accused and to clothe him so that we do not have to be shamed in the sight of God with his nakedness."

The boy looked at me with alarm. "You'll burn him!" he said. "Our friend. He played with us."

"He is not your friend, my child. Go now."

I dismissed them all and told them to make fast the door of the cellar behind us.

And the stranger said, so quietly that indeed I was not sure whether he spoke aloud at all, or whether the words simply sounded within the confines of my mind, "I am not a monster. I am from another world. I am lost. I beg of you, send me home."

I hoped for a few hours' peace before going to the chateau to say mass, but it was not to be. In the little cell they gave me, which was behind the kitchen, I scoured, by candlelight, the books I had brought with me, trying to glean some knowledge of just what this creature might be. Was he a denizen of hell who had somehow escaped the confines of the Dark One, and by saying "Send me home" was he actually begging for some kind of salvation, some reconciliation with God? Was there a village idiot underneath this skin, who had been possessed by a devil, who could yet be cured, if the devil could only be driven from the flesh? Was it a devious impostor, come to tempt me?

These were all possibilities. That was why a fair trial was essential.

In the brief hour of twilight, before the sunrise, I knelt down to pray. Before I did so, I stripped off my habit and my hair shirt, took the blood-stained knout from my satchel, and vigorously flagellated myself. To no avail. I had barely begun the *paternoster* when Alice, unbidden, entered

the room. It was almost as though my penance had conjured up a further test.

"Mon père," she said. And then, again, "Oh Jean, my love."

I shook. My back was still bloody and it was perhaps the pain that convulsed me, though I should have been used to it by now; but no, it was the spiritual turmoil. "That was years ago. That was weakness. We can never think of it."

"That's easy for you to say, mon père," Alice said. "I've paid for it every day since then. I haven't come to reprove you. I know that you scourge yourself. But there are other kinds of penance, too. Guillaume should not be growing up here, in this desolate place. He's part of you. Can you not acknowledge that?"

"It's a lot to comprehend in a single day. Does the boy know?"

"Perhaps. I don't know. I've seen you look at each other. He may have guessed. And he has your eyes. I love him most for that."

"Alice," I said, "there are cardinals who have sired children, and popes who have made their bastards cardinals. But the Bishop of Nantes doesn't have a very modern mind. And I'm a Dominican. A *teacher*. How if it is seen that I do not follow my own preaching? Shall I give up even my vows to God?"

"Did you not do so already, Jean?"

And there she had me. But I had done penance. God forgives, even if the Bishop of Nantes would not. "But what would you have me do?"

"Take your son with you. You don't have to acknowledge him. Make him your servant. He could learn to read and write. He has a beautiful voice. He could have a future life as a court musician, or a cathedral chorister."

"But they would have to cut him for that," I said. "And some boys do die under the barber's knife."

She has never seen what they do, I can tell. Oh, I have seen fine chanteurs with the voices of angels. The timeless melancholy of their songs comes, I think, from the wound to their manhood, which even when it has healed leaves a longing that can never be fulfilled.

"I don't understand those things. All I know is that you have resources. You sleep in castles. You can call soldiers to throw people into dungeons. Your son has a grudging stepfather who doesn't want to spare the food to fill his belly, and he is the most powerless person in a village that men say is already damned. You must take him. Whipping yourself is all very well, but can't you see that you're also punishing *him*?"

I had come to Tiffauges to investigate a crime against God. But was I myself also to be subjected to the Question?

Alice kissed me. My flesh hardened, but I could not harden my heart. I turned away. I needed to be pure for tomorrow.

"I'm sorry, mon père." She curtsied and left the room. Her scent remained. And so did the wound.

Why the wound, what wound? There was no wound. Should I not have followed the example of almost-martyred Origen and made myself a eunuch for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven? Obviously a vow to God was an empty promise. Only the slice of a knife held truth.

\* \* \*



Both Brother Paolo and Alice had told me Guillaume could sing; I only knew how well that morning, when I said mass in the chapel. Brother Paolo had found an old psalter, and he had badgered the boy into coming up to the chateau and had taught him, neume by neume, a short chanson by Dufay, the Burgundian; and during the offertorium they contrived to perform it, with the brother playing the tenor on the psalter and essaying the contratenor himself, while Guillaume took the upper part, with the high notes that seem to hover in the air. . . .

I should say first that, at breakfast, over a loaf of black bread and a beaker of wine, the Chevalier Johan told me that all had been done as I had asked. They had requisitioned some of the peasants to dust and mop some of the rooms in the chateau; for they feared the soldiers more than they feared the curse of Bluebeard.

The chapel, wherein the Marshall of France had permitted the most repulsive abominations, had been scoured of dirt by dawn. The peasants who had been commanded to do the work stayed for mass, but several from the village came, too. Perhaps they thought that the touch of the host upon their tongues could take away the lingering taste of terror.

It was during the offertorium that Brother Paolo's ad hoc consort performed. The peasants had, of course, little to offer but a few loaves and cheeses; yet our torturer went among them, gracefully taking the gifts with a smile. They could never have guessed his normal profession.

The music was a setting of a holy sonnet by Francesco Petrarca; I knew this must be Brother Paolo's doing, for though the composer was Flemish, he had been in service in Italy, and the chanson had an Italian lilt to it, for the Italians have the fashion of giving a soaring melody to the highest voice, reducing the others to little more than accompaniment.

When I heard the words, I ached; for Petrarca speaks of the beautiful virgin cloaked in the sun and the stars, and then the poem goes on to say, "I want to offer thee my prayers, but I cannot even begin to pray without thy help. . . ."

And it was the issue of my loins who sang those words, and he made the notes linger in the chill air as they climbed, note piling upon note, like a stairway to the sky—

*In caelo.*

That pitiful creature claimed to reside in the sky! And now he had put a curse on me, and I could not see the face of the Blessed Virgin with the raiment of starlight, but instead, a more earthly woman, a woman whose earthy scent and moist lips cried out for me to sin, whose every gesture was derived from the temptation of Eve and the wiles of the Serpent. I stood there, sweat pouring down my face even though the chapel was cold.

And my son's voice rose above the turmoil . . . and there came dawn. A ray of light burst through the east window and illuminated the altar. And my son's voice was in that light. It lifted me out of darkness. In that melody was the voice of God himself.

And I saw the beauty in his eyes, my eyes. . . .

I knew now how I had to redeem my sinful past. I had to rescue my son. Woman though she was, Alice had been a messenger. Those sweet sounds must not perish. He must be cut; surely the Lord would guide the knife



Himself, for the saving of so perfect a voice. My son was not to know the sins of the flesh. He could not fall as I had fallen. I knew then why God had sent me back to Tiffauges.

But for now, I kept this revelation in my heart.

The papal regulations allow for only two sessions of Question; it is therefore the custom never to declare a session ended, so that the prescribed methods of ferreting out the truth may be applied until the truth is actually obtained.

The first session, which is intended to proceed without torture, I always like to stage in a well-lit room, without a threatening atmosphere. So we used the largest room in the chateau. Apart from a minimal chaining of the ankles, the prisoner was given free rein to stand or sit as he chose, and given a stool. I myself occupied what must have once been the Marshall's magisterial chair; flanking me were Brother Paolo with his reference books, Brother Pierre, with his quill, ink, and parchment, and Jean the Barber; that, and our Chevalier and a few of the soldiers, were all that the huge council chamber held.

Now that I saw him in broad daylight, I knew why the children had covered him with mud. He was green. Oh, not *obviously* green, like grass or an emerald, but he had a gray-green cast to him. With a tunic, belt, and shoes, it was less noticeable, because the eyes were what held you most about him. But I did not fail to notice what I did not see in the dim light of the innkeeper's cellar; his hands were webbed, like the feet of a duck.

Once in a while, one hears of a child with webbed feet and hands being born in some remote village, and the peasants do not hesitate to kill it, for to dispose of a monster is not deemed murder. I had never heard of one surviving to adulthood.

Still, save for the odd coloration, the scales, the webbed hands, the creature did not exude an aura of evil. Not in this light, at least. I thought him more pitiful than terrifying.

Although I knew that he could speak Latin, I decided to begin the interrogation in the vulgar tongue.

"What is your name?" I asked.

"We have no names," he said. "We are all fragments of an All. Names are bad. They fracture us from the One." It was nonsense.

"But you must have a name," I said. It was a bureaucrat's nightmare; you have the papers, and you cannot even begin, because such things are filed away by name, and there is no name, how can one begin?

"We shall give you a name," I said. I turned to Brother Paolo. "Pick any name. We shall not fumble this case over mere sophistry."

"Call me Guillaume," said the creature.

Like Jean, Guillaume is one of the commonest names in France. But I could not help thinking that he took that name to taunt me with my sin. I was about to stop Brother Paolo, but he had already written it down.

"No, you are wrong," said Guillaume the Monster. "I honor him, he my first friend in this world." His French comes and goes; sometimes it is perfect; sometimes it is disjointed, as though he were stringing the sentences together from a heap of words.

"Why do you say this world? Know you another world?"

"I am lost. My world is far."

"Where is your world?"

Guillaume the Monster points only at the ceiling.

"Are you an angel?"

"Angel? . . . Oh." He seemed perplexed. He looked as though he was searching through some store of information to retrieve the word. "Oh. You mean ἄγγελος. Then he said in French, "Messenger. Yes. I messenger."

"So you claim to be a member of the heavenly host."

"I fall from sky."

Brother Paolo cried out, "Listen! He condemns himself from his own lips. He is a fallen angel."

This was an outlandish claim; why would such an apparition not appear in some royal court, or before His Holiness himself? Why would a fallen angel choose an obscure village to bring his message to the world? But the answer was obvious when I thought about it. It was clear that the foul rites practiced by Gilles de Rais had left a sort of spiritual chasm here. When a man murders hundreds of children to satiate his sexual appetites, all the while invoking the names of the Dark Powers, there are surely consequences to the natural order. For the tiniest sin is a hideous affront to God, and these were monstrous. It was as though Bluebeard had dug a well straight through to the heart of hell. Why not, then, a fiend shooting forth from the infernal depths, cloaked in fiery brimstone, to tempt the mind of an innocent?

Still, there were some elementary tests. "Can you say the Lord's Prayer?" I asked him.

The monster said, "How can I know these things? I come from the sky."

Jean the Torturer said, "I'm afraid that there's very little we can do about this." I knew he was not anxious to get out all his instruments, but like all of us he understood the meaning of duty.

I said, "Let's not be in a rush to be cruel. I suggest we try an exorcism first."

As was the custom, I declared, and entered into the record, that the session was adjourned; and we took our midday break, after leaving the prisoner more securely chained up in the council chamber, and well guarded.

The innkeeper sent up a brace of duck to the chateau; it was my son who brought the food, for though we had dismissed him after the morning mass, he had begged for some excuse to return.

We ate quickly and prepared our vestments as well as an aspergillum and a large cauldron of holy water. I asked the Chevalier to send a swift rider to Nantes; I suspected that reinforcements were going to be needed; not more soldiers, but more expert demonologists. Reverently, I kissed the violet stola before placing it over my surplice. I have never taken exorcism lightly.

But when I returned to the council chamber, I found the two Guillaumes alone together.

"What are you doing?" I shouted.

My Guillaume backed away. He had been bent over the prisoner; he had a cup in his hand.

"I'm sorry, mon père. I was giving him water."

I said, "You, of all people, need to stay away from him. He has invaded your mind more than anyone. He has plucked things out and will use them against us—against you in particular. Your immortal soul is in grave peril."

He looked at me and I could sense—defiance. And then, with bowed head, my Guillaume slunk away.

"Do you know what I am going to do?" I asked the monster.

For normally, when one is about to perform an exorcism, the demon has foreknowledge. When the holy water is brought into the room, he begins to howl. He hurls obscenities at the priest, and malodorous fumes begin to rise, which are best counteracted by the liberal use of frankincense. To that end I had already prepared two censers and the sweet fragrance was already seeping into the room. But Guillaume the Monster did not respond at all.

I began the asperging, dipping the aspergillum and calling on the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, the Blessed Virgin, St. Peter, St. Michael, St. Denis, and all the company of heaven to witness. While Brother Pierre held open the book of exorcism, an ancient illuminated tome bound with rusty clasps, Brother Paolo held up the crucifix to the prisoner's face, but the creature did not flinch; he merely stared at it curiously, blinking.

I started the preparatory incantations and then, summoning up all my inner strength, I bellowed out the words of exorcism: *Exorcizo te, immundissime spiritus, omnis incusio adversarii, omne phantasma, omnis legio, in nomini domini nostri Jesu Christi eradicare . . .* and with each sign of the cross I swung the aspergillum, knowing full well that the power that resided in the water would burn the devil from the being's flesh. . . .

But Guillaume the Monster merely sat there. Blinking. Was he so oblivious to the word of God?

When the ritual was done, he spoke to me. "That was an interesting ceremony, Father Lenclud. What does it mean? May I see a repetition, so that I can play back the recorded memory to my companions in the sky?"

There arose in me a terrible anger. He was *mocking* me! He was ridiculing God Almighty. I knew that my blind fury was a sin. I went outside to get some fresh air. I was panting and my heart was beating fast. In the courtyard, I saw my Guillaume, sitting by a well.

My son pulled a fresh bucket of water, and gave me to drink. Though the noonday sun was brilliant, there were still piles of snow among the cobblestones. He held out the bowl for me, and the sun was behind him and the wind stirred his hair and I saw in his face all that I once wished to be, but could no longer, for that I had long descended into tainted ways of sin. I wanted to tell him right then and there, but perhaps it was not the moment. I drank deeply, and the water dampened my choler.

"How is he?" my son said. "Is he in pain?"

I saw in his face a profound compassion and I thought to myself, "Guillaume, my son, you are good to feel such Christian love for even a creature such as this." I wanted so much to embrace him. But we are taught to avoid the warmth of human closeness, for darker dangers may lurk behind an innocuous caress. The mere touch of a boy's hand has aroused un-

natural passion in many a cleric. It were better not to risk it. Love is best experienced solely in the spirit. I cursed myself for a hypocrite to think such things when only last night Alice had flung herself at me and I had released myself only with reluctance from temptation. I only said, "We are not torturing him at the moment, my son. It is possible that he will reveal all without recourse to the second stage of the Question. And we will all be spared much grief."

All afternoon, I wielded the aspergillum with a will. I asked my brothers to asperge the creature when my own arms tired. I shouted out the words of the ritual. Three times we commanded the devil to depart. Three times I flung the water and shouted out those puissant words, words designed to make Satan himself quiver in the very bowels in hell; yet the prisoner did not yield, did not even show fear; if he evinced any emotion at all, it was curiosity. Exhausted and exasperated beyond all measure, I finally hurled the entire basin at him. It struck him in the head. The water scattered and clouds of steam rose up. And at this unexpected turn, he slumped over and I was immediately concerned, for it is not a priest's place to inflict pain. But then, when I looked about him, I saw that the pools of water were all boiling, and that there poured from a gash in his forehead a thick green rheum; and the creature began to tremble as though he had the falling sickness, so that the chains clanked and made a racket that should have woken the very dead. A blast of heat emanated from him, and unearthly sounds poured from his throat; at last, I could see the normal signs of possession.

Then, as I gaped, the wound in his brow knit itself together, and the pools of water ceased seething, and the room was as icy cold as before.

And he sat there, unperturbed.

I sank back on my inquisitorial chair. I was sweating. I called for wine. Slowly, the creature seemed to regain his senses, and sat up as before.

I folded my palms and began to pray. "God," I whispered, "I am already worn out. The demon will not budge. Oh God, give me strength. My faith is sorely tested." These words I spoke for myself alone.

So I was surprised when an answer seemed to come, not from heaven, but from my green-skinned adversary. "You know, Father," he said, "there is another possibility."

We are warned never to engage in conversation with the devil, for it leads only to despair. But before I could think of that, I had already said, "And that is?"

"Is it not possible," he said, "that I am *not* in fact possessed, and that I am simply what I say I am?"

I dared not respond for fear of further temptation. For I knew then that we were in the presence of a very powerful force indeed; that this was a stubborn being and that the light of truth would reach him only with the utmost difficulty. If the creature were not inhabited by a demon, he must be making those impious statements out of his own free will; which meant that he must be a heretic.

I took another gulp of the wine, and I commanded that he be removed to the dungeon. This investigation was inexorably moving down a path I did not wish for. Nonetheless, I reflected, *thy will be done*.

\* \* \*

I rode down to the village because I could not bear to sleep in the vicinity of that being. Of course, in the village I faced demons as well, but at least they were my own.

At the inn, I supped on boiled leeks and a morsel of greasy pigeon. I sat alone, long after the others had retired, nursing a warm ale. I dozed a little. I was startled awake, perhaps by the sound of the embers collapsing, for the fire was dying. I saw that my Guillaume was in the room, and that he was standing over me, gazing down at my face.

"My son," I said. A priest would say that to any boy. Yet I immediately feared to have revealed too much.

"Mon père, I would speak to you alone."

"Shall I take your confession?"

"It's not that. Mon père, Brother Paolo has been speaking to me. He says I should leave the village and seek my fortune as a singer. He told me that a voice like mine could gladden the hearts of prelates and of kings. He told me about cities and places I'll never see if I'm stuck here minding the pigs until I die. My mother told me the same thing. But they also say I will have to give up something—my manhood. I don't want that."

"Did they explain it to you?"

"Yes. They said that if I undergo the cutting, I'll never become a man. But I'll never lose this voice, either. They say it's a sacrifice I must make. Otherwise I'll always be a peasant, and a bastard at that. But I know it'll hurt and I know people die, sometimes."

"What did you say to your mother?" I asked him.

"I said, I really don't want to do it. I'm scared. I hate to be hurt. The innkeeper . . ." He hesitated. "Well, I am a bastard," he said. He turned his back to me and lowered his tunic a little, and I could see old welts in the firelight. I burned with rage, but I held myself back, for anger is one of the seven deadly sins. Truly, my one night's sin was being visited on the next generation. But if my son was willing to be cut, I reflected, at least the cycle of penance would end. "It's all right, really. I don't mind getting whipped that much. I'm used to it. It's like I can't do anything right for him."

"Sit here beside me, Guillaume of Tiffauges," I said. He obeyed. His closeness terrified me. "Did your mother say that you should undergo this operation?"

"She said that it was entirely my decision."

"And what is your decision?" I dared to caress his hair for a brief moment. This time, alone with me, he did not flinch.

"I told her that I will do it if you command it, mon père."

"Why me?"

"Because you are my father," he said.

And I saw that he knew, he knew it with utter certitude, as I knew of the existence of heaven and hell. "Who told you this?" I said. "Your mother swore to me she would never speak of our—"

"She didn't betray you, mon père. I found out for myself."

"But how?"

"He told me, mon père."

Should I now say that the boy wept, and told me how he had dreamed for so many years of knowing his father, that he had imagined him a crusader, a warrior, a hunter, a prince, a troubadour, a sorcerer, but never in his wildest dreams a priest? Should I tell how his tears broke down my reserve at last, and how I embraced him and felt at long last the joy of an untainted love?

I may not say these things. Because, at that time, they did not happen. Rather I answered him very simply, "Then I do command it."

And he said, "I will do what you tell me, father." And he got up, and planted a single dry kiss upon my tearless cheek, and he left me.

I thought of the pain I was about to inflict upon him. But I thought also of God the Father, who must have known full well what pain our Lord his Son would have to undergo; I thought also of Isaac, consenting to the knife with joy because it was his father's will; and only then, only when there was no one to see me, did I give way to tears. I cried myself to oblivion, and before dawn they found me there, and woke me for the ride back up to the chateau, so I could say mass.

As the "gentle persuasion" portion of the investigation was now over, it seemed more appropriate to continue in the dungeons. The use of torture is never to be undertaken without proper reflection. After all, anxious as they were to obtain a conviction, the Inquisition did not torture Joan of Arc.

The dungeons were the dark heart of Tiffauges. It was there that Bluebeard once made a pile of the decapitated heads of the children he had murdered, so that he could compare them to see which was the most beautiful. It was here that the Marshall of France kept his captives, lured to the castle by the promise of a place in the chapel choir or a position as page in his service. It was here that he sated his lusts, culminating always in a gore-drenched, erotically charged slaughter.

No torture unto death would, of course, be practiced by us. Indeed, the papal instructions are very specific, for we may not even shed one drop of blood during the Question. Bloodletting is the domain of the secular arm; our concern is only with the soul.

Only a single session of torture is permitted by church law, though one can by unwritten custom extend that session over many periods if need be.

I entered the dungeon they had selected, one with no light but torchlight, and an odious damp, with vermin underfoot—for it is important to produce in the Questioned person the feeling of utter hopelessness, so as to hasten his confession. Jean the Torturer had already set up the strappado. The Inquisitorial chair had been brought down, and a rich rug placed to receive it and the desk, at which Brother Pierre already sat, with his notes and quill at hand, making the initial log entries by candlelight.

Guillaume the Monster had been stripped of his clothing, for the shame of public nakedness is often enough to induce a confession. Naturally, I averted my eyes, for it is not seemly for a spiritual man to behold such things; but curiosity made me look anyway, and when I did I could not help but stare.



The greenish cast of the skin was made more reptilian in the dungeon's smoky light. They had already tied the cords to the shoulders, and attached the weights to his feet, but the torturer was waiting for my signal before beginning the actual excruciation.

As I grew used to the dimness, I stood up to examine him more closely, hoping for some sign that would allow me to avoid torture. For example, a clear supernumerary nipple could indicate his involvement in witchcraft; a circumcised *membrum virile* would signify that he was a Jew. We could have proceeded straight to the conviction.

But this monstrosity possessed no nipples at all, nor anything resembling a reproductive organ. His chest was a pattern of scales. Below his waist, his legs began. The scale pattern continued straight down.

He said, "You seem surprised, mon père."

"You are . . . you are a natural eunuch! And without even vestigial nipples . . . you are neither male nor female . . . were you female, you could not suckle a child . . . were you male, you could not engender a child . . . you are an abomination!" The horror of it was unspeakable. Such prodigies are always killed at birth.

"Perhaps my kind does not require this type of reproduction," said Guillaume the Monster. "We are already aspects of the One."

"So you claim to be without original sin?" I said.

"What is sin?" said the monster.

"Do you not honor God?"

"Who is God?" he asked me.

"God is everything."

"Then am I God?"

I could listen no more. I gave Jean the signal to hoist him up. As the weights left the ground I could hear the crack of the shoulder joints dislocating. "You mock God?" I shouted. "You claim to be in a state of grace?"

He writhed, and a serpentine hissing escaped his lips.

"More weights!" I screamed. "You will confess!"

"To what shall I confess?"

"That you are a heretic! That you claim to be free of sin, a state the Church alone is empowered to bestow through the holy rite of confession and absolution! Confess!"

"I am not a heretic. I am from another world. I am lost. Send me home."

"And how shall that be, when you claim that your home is in heaven?"

"I have already told your son how I may go home! There are two ways; the first is for me to communicate with the mother ship. The device is under the ice! You have but to wait until the spring thaw is complete and—"

At the mention of my Guillaume, I became more furious. With what corruptions had he been feeding my son? I commanded the torturer to add more weights, while every croak, every hiss was carefully noted down by Brother Pierre. The arms were already quite out of their sockets; the muscles were tearing; the monster's eyes bulged and he appeared to gasp. But what I did not hear were cries of pain. And so I hardened my heart and told Jean the Torturer to add weights until there were far more weights than any human could bear, which proved that Satan was behind his unnatural resistance, and which inflamed my fury still more.



"Confess that you have denied the sacraments! That you're a Jew! A witch! That you have had carnal knowledge of Satan! That you're a Cathar! A Waldensian! You have but to admit to a single heresy and I will cease tormenting you!"

It was at that moment, with my emotions aroused to fever pitch, that our captive's arms tore loose and he fell to the floor with a crash. It was horrible, especially as the rats began scurrying over him. A greenish sap began to ooze from the sockets. The arms flailed back and forth as though independently alive.

"We're spilling blood!" I gasped, horrified that we had broken the papal regulations. "Jean, you must stanch it quickly!"

"I don't understand," said the torturer. "I haven't applied enough pressure to rip off any limbs." He was upset; a professional should know his craft better than to make such a bungle of things; I could tell that he was utterly appalled at himself. Quickly he found some rags so that he could prevent too much blood from touching the ground, which is the actual letter of the law we were violating. There was some straw in the dungeon—it was the prisoner's bedding—and he threw it over the heretic to try to absorb some of the gore.

But Brother Paolo said, "It is green, Father Lenclud. It is not blood."

The severed arms swung back and forth and now began to sizzle and char, and an acrid green smoke began to fill the dungeon. I ordered more torches to be lit. We had to see what we were doing. A foul green fluid was spurting over our faces. I saw that Brother Paolo was right. This was not blood. It had neither the consistency nor the characteristic stench. Jean the Torturer had not broken the law.

Meanwhile, Guillaume the Monster was writhing on the stone floor among the vermin. A cacophonous babble issued from his lips. Doubtless it was some appalling witchery such as the Lord's prayer backward. Indeed, clearly there was necromancy afoot, because the creature's shoulder sockets were quivering, vibrating, and small green stalks were pushing their way out through the flesh . . . he was growing a new pair of arms, as though they were the tails of a lizard! I simply stared. The babble resolved itself once more into words:

"I am not a heretic. I am from another world. I beg you, send me home. I can wait until the spring thaw is complete. Or you can set off my internal monitor to signal the ship. . . ."

Words they may have been, but it was still nonsense.

"His body magically repairs itself," said Jean the Torturer, and I was reminded of the tale of the hydra, who grew more heads whenever one was chopped off.

"But," said Brother Paolo as he watched Brother Pierre finish a sentence of his transcript with a flourish of his quill, "the regeneration of the flesh, and the fact that his body contains no blood to be spilled, opens up, by the legal constraints imposed by the papacy, a loophole in the process of excruciation. . . ."

I understood at once. Without blood, without any permanent destruction of the flesh, there was no legal limit to the violence that could be inflicted upon this monster in the interests of saving his immortal soul.

Much relieved, Jean the Torturer immediately strung him up again and, secure in the knowledge that he was committing no excommunicable crime, brought out more extreme instruments of pain. The scourgings, lashings, and burnings made us all wince, but the creature's stubbornness continued to inflame me, and by late afternoon I had almost taken complete leave of my senses. His stubbornness caused almost a reversal in our roles; for where normally the accused would be pleading for mercy after a few hours' torment, it was the Brothers and I who were so worn out by the monster's equanimity that we were begging, pleading, cajoling the creature to try to get even the vaguest confession.

Half a dozen pairs of arms swung from the rafters. Piles of straw were soaking up puddles of greenish phlegm.

Jean's art had punctured the monster's skin in several places. There were holes through which we could see the workings of his innards, and now, as he lay, his skin pulsating, yet another pair of arms pushing forth out of his sockets, his words were hoarse and accompanied by a bizarre whistling as breath passed through the many extra channels in his flesh. And he continued his talk of coming from the sky, and returning there, and incomprehensible mumbo-jumbo about his mission and about his internal sensors. We must have made some kind of an impression, surely! For his voice wheezed, and it seemed to me that I saw some weariness in his eyes.

I was about to declare an official continuation of the session until the next day, when the door of the dungeon creaked open, and my son Guillaume entered the torture chamber.

"Church business is not to be interrupted!" Brother Pierre shouted, and threw a cape over the monster. But I knew that Guillaume had already seen.

"Mon père," he said, "I have come as you commanded, to receive the operation."

There was a dead silence. Under the cloak, the monster twitched and fibrillated. Guillaume looked up at the ceiling, where the creature's many pairs of severed arms still dangled. The cloak slid off the monster's face and we could all see his eyes, peering back and forth with a discomfiting watchfulness.

Guillaume looked at me and raised his arms in a gesture of remonstrance, and I said simply, "What can I do, Guillaume? He won't confess."

"Mon père," Guillaume said, "You could have asked me. I know what will make him confess."

"Child, there is a manual of instruction composed by His Holiness himself about these matters. We deviate from it on pain of eternal damnation. Leave these things to us. Come upstairs, now, into the light. We'll talk of your operation and of your future. Forget what you've seen."

"But mon père," he said, "my mother tells me you have an expert, who will wield the knife deftly and who will give me as little pain as he can. Who is he?"

"I," said Jean the Torturer, who in an ideal world would have preferred to be known only as Jean the Barber.

And he held out hands of welcome, hands from which oozed the heretic's green rheum.

\* \* \*

The torturer had not, of course, brought a gelding knife. He had to make do with an instrument that had that same day sliced leeks in the castle kitchens.

I wanted the cutting to occur in a room as distant as possible from the squalor of Guillaume's former life. The peasants looked askance when I requisitioned the Marshall's own bedchamber, and commanded that clean linens be set out, and a goose-down pillow; but they could not argue with me, for I represented the Church, and the Church had jurisdiction over the chateau for the present.

I had them gather plenty of wood for the fireplace. I even went so far as to order Jean the Barber to bathe, so that my son would not see the spattered traces of the monster's excruciation upon his hands and face. And I had extra candles brought in so that he would not wake up in the dark, and be frightened. The finest silver basins were brought in to catch the blood and to hold water to lave the wound.

Guillaume was terribly afraid. We held him down, I by the arms and Brother Paolo by the legs. I gave him a stick to bite on. I could not look into his eyes, could not gaze on the terror which was being inflicted by my will alone. The barber lifted the boy's tunic and sliced and Guillaume started screaming almost before the knife touched flesh, and he went on screaming. We held him fast. I did not realize there would be so much blood. I squeezed my eyes shut as the boy screamed and the torturer turned barber sliced, steadily and methodically, until the boy's scrotum was completely severed. Then, working as swiftly as he could, he applied bandages and a salve, wrapping as Guillaume screamed himself into a frenzy and, at last, exhausted from it all, sunk back onto the bloody sheets.

"You can let go of him," said the barber. "It is done."

I realized I was still gripping the lad's arms tight. I relaxed, but he clung to my wrists and murmured, "Papa, papa." And then he fainted.

The others looked away. I knew then that they knew, they all knew. "I will sit with him," I said.

"Yes, you must," said Jean. "The first hours are critical. He is in so much pain that his soul cannot decide whether to flee his body. It isn't only the physical pain, *mon père*; it's the feeling of eternal loss. He doesn't even *want* to come back . . . but you can give him something to hope for, to live for."

And all of them left me, and I sat alone, by the side of the bed, listening to him moan. I could not sleep. I did not know whether Guillaume slept; he twisted and turned, and sometimes his eyes opened; he never let go of my hand. The one Guillaume I had meant to hurt, and not the other; unwittingly I had caused their fates to be reversed. I prayed; oh, how I did pray. "I'll give my immortal soul," I whispered, "if he will only pull through."

Toward midnight, he seemed to quieten. I wiped the sweat from his brow. He stirred. At last, he opened his eyes. He said, very softly, "Don't you want to know how to get him to confess?"

I said, "Don't think of it, my son."

"You hurt me," he said. But he said it without rancor. I loved him for that.

"I know," I said. And squeezed his hand.

"I don't mind," he said. "It's what you wanted."

I said, "The pain will go away."

He said, "I did what you wanted. So now, I'm going to ask you to do something I want."

"Anything," I said softly.

"He will confess if you promise that you will burn him at the stake," Guillaume said.

"Don't say such things," I said. "There's no need for you to become involved in—"

"No, Papa, please listen. I will tell it to you exactly as I heard it, because I don't understand it, but he made me memorize it yesterday, when I gave him water. He may not seem to be in pain, but he is desperate. He can wait until the thaw to retrieve his communication device, but there is another way for him to go home, another, more desperate way. He has a sensor embedded deep inside him. It's not a machine, it's a part of him because he's connected to all the others. It's as if they only have one soul between them, he told me. If his vital signs suggest that he's in imminent danger of death, it will start to transmit . . . he told me they're cold-blooded. Extreme heat will set it off."

"You are delirious," I said. "You're speaking nonsense."

"But promise me that you will tell him you'll burn him at the stake."

The boy was clearly maddened by his agony, but I knew I had to promise. I did so. He squeezed my hand again, and finally drifted into slumber.

In the morning, I did what my Guillaume had asked me, and the monster immediately, to my astonishment, confessed to an entire litany of heresies. I fell to my knees and thanked God that I no longer needed to have recourse to torture. I swore then that, though I had promised to burn the creature, I would give him a final chance to repent and accept the mercy of strangulation; I owed him that much at least, for it was because of him that I had learned what it is to love a child.

And in the afternoon, we put the heretic's cap and robes on our prisoner and shut him up in a cage, as one would a circus animal, and hitched the cage to an ox; and I wrapped my son up in many layers of blankets and loaded his pallet onto my cart for the drive back to Nantes.

Alice and the innkeeper came to see us off; but I did not say a word to them. I tried to avoid Alice's eyes completely. I knew that she had given up her only treasure, and the only token she had ever possessed of the single night when I had forgotten my vows to God.

There are not so many heretic burnings as there used to be; and so it was that by the time enough heretics had been delivered to the secular arm that a reasonable spectacle could be had on market day, the days had lengthened and there was no more snow to be seen. And each day, my son grew stronger, and we never spoke of the night of his delirium. But as for the burning itself, Guillaume would not leave the house, though he was hale enough to have started his singing lessons.

Yet I had made a vow to God that I would personally try to urge Guillaume the Monster toward an eleventh hour repentance. And thus it was I found myself standing beside him at the stake, holding up a cross to him and urging him to turn to God.

"Who is God?" he asked me.

Around us, the other heretics were already on fire. The crowd was festive; they laughed, they sang, they jeered, they frolicked; music played, sausages were grilled, church bells rang. But it all seemed irrelevant. What transpired now was between the two of us alone.

In my whole life, I have made love only once, and that was in shame. And yet I have heard, in the confessional, enough to know what it is like for laypersons. Lovemaking is not permitted to men who have given themselves wholly to Christ, and yet, to us inquisitors, there is an alternative. For the process of the Question is not unlike carnal knowledge of a woman.

First, you see, there comes the foreplay, the teasing, the flirting; that is the first stage, where we try to extract the confession swiftly; yet if we succeed, it is somehow not entirely fulfilling. Then there is the physical part; the writhing, the flailing; that, you see, is the torture, and that can lead only to one thing: the final explosion of passion, the spurting of the seed; that is the confession, you see. And at last, with the violent emotions spent, comes the afterglow, the gentle conversation, the quiet descent into slumber.

And this was the manner of conversation now, at the ultimate hour. It had a preternatural calm to it, even as the flames raged and the crowd roared about us like an ocean. There was no going back.

He had asked me who God is, and I was bound to tell him: "God is the one who made us all, who loves us, who knows us inside out; and he dwells in Heaven. He who does not seek God is bound forever to the darkness."

"If that is true," said Guillaume the Monster, his scaly face utterly serene, "then I already know God. And I am going to him now. For the being of which I am a part does dwell in the sky, and when I am cut off from him I am utterly desolate."

"You have rejected God," I said. "What you call God is a Satanic lie."

"And what sane sentient being," said the monster, "would *not* reject your God? You have made a mockery of compassion. You have twisted the truth in a thousand ways. You care only for your confessions, never for the truth itself."

"Repent," I cried out, and I held the cross right up to his face. It cast a cruciform shadow on his alien features.

"It is because you humans are all fortresses, impregnable and isolated, incapable of empathy; because you are not part of some greater consciousness, that you have invented these fanciful stories about gods and demons," he said. "If you only knew how alone each one of you is, how incapable of the weakest psychic communion, you would despair. You would not care to live."

A soldier of the Secular Arm called up to me. "Come down, Father Lenclud! We need to get going, this is the last one."

"For the last time," I cried out. "You can be saved if you only say a few words of repentance. You can be spared the earthly flames. You can dwell in Him, in the unity of the holy spirit—"

"Then I am already God, for I already dwell in Him," he said.

And the fire began to blaze. I knew that I myself would be consumed if I did not leave. The piles of kindling crackled. The flames hissed. Already, the creature's extremities were beginning to char.

Suddenly, at that moment, the sky abruptly darkened. A monstrous dark *thing* descended and blotted out the sun. A shaft of brilliant blue light shot out of the heavens and struck the heretic, and he immediately vaporized. And then it was over, and the sun shone as before.

I looked wildly about. The revelers in the streets still danced and sang. Hawkers sold wine and food. Had no one seen what I had seen? And was the creature not gone? There were only the chains. Had my eyes played tricks on me?

Or had this heretic really been snatched up into the sky in a chariot of darkness?

I was troubled that night. I could not reconcile what I had seen with all that I knew and believed. Yet, as time passed, I came to believe it might have been an illusion. For the alternative made me far too uneasy. And I had to be steadfast in faith, for I had a child to raise.

In the bedchamber of the new King Louis XI of France, my son Guillaume is singing. I am not permitted to enter; it is a performance for the most intimate circle of the King's friends.

But as I wait for my son behind the arras, I realize that the song is another by that Burgundian, Dufay, whose song to the Blessed Virgin once moved Brother Paolo to demand the boy's emasculation. This is a secular song, *Donnes l'Assault*, in which the poet compares his lady to an impregnable castle to which he has lain siege. He speaks of battering down the gate to enjoy the treasure within. It is a bawdy song, turning images of war into double entendres. There is laughter in the bedroom; men's laughter, the high-pitched silvery laugh of a loose woman.

I wait for the song to end. It is a tawdry song, but haunting, too. And the wounded innocence of my son's voice transforms it from a jest to a thing of vaunting beauty. Oh, the song moves me.

For did not the other Guillaume declare that we humans were all fortresses, impregnable, doomed to be forever isolated from one another? That it was this that drove us to torture and maim and burn others to death? Oh, that is true. But it is also what gives us this yearning. Guillaume's song is filled with the unfullfillable; he sings of what he is doomed never to possess; and that is the source of its searing beauty.

Was it for this beauty that my Guillaume gave up becoming fully a man?

Or was it for material gain? He will be wealthy, I know; he will be a courtier. He will become far more famous than I. But he did not do it to become rich, or to know the honeyed compliments of court ladies. He did it as a proof of his love for me. He did it because I demanded it of him.

Yet who was I to play God?



I too have become powerful. I too have become rich. But something in me has died. Or perhaps was plucked from my soul and has ascended into the sky along with the body of my heretical monster.

I too was transformed by the fire.

I have sent many more to the flames since that day. I have signed many death warrants. I have consented to innumerable sessions of savage torture, and always with the knowledge that my scruples have ineluctably eroded until the act of condemning a man to an agonizing death has become but a figment of bureaucracy, a flourish of a signature.

Am I evil? I have come to believe that I am. I care not. I accept it, because my becoming evil is the price of being allowed to love my son.

Though the heretic from another world has proved incontrovertibly to me that Satan exists, I am, alas, no longer certain of the existence of God. ○

## THE LUNARCHEOLOGIST REQUESTS

Don't keep diaries  
 Don't take pictures.  
 Don't be heroes.  
 Don't wear sensors,  
 so we don't know where you went.  
 Don't mark graves, don't date them,  
 so we don't know your loves  
 Don't paint murals in your tunnels  
 showing great battles and pure values.  
 Leave the moon a mess  
 so future lunarcheologists will  
 know challenges, spin theories  
 and land our precious tenure.  
 And thank you for making  
 epics, mysteries, and myths  
 from that gray and dusty moon  
 instead of mere industrial history.  
 Unless, of course,  
 you can do both.

—Greg Beatty



Catherine Wells is the author of *Mother Grimm* and several SF books and short stories. Her latest novel, *Stones of Destiny* (Four O'Clock Press), retells the Macbeth tale in its historical context. Readers can find out more about her works at [www.sff.net/people/catherine-wells](http://www.sff.net/people/catherine-wells). Catherine and her husband live in Tucson, Arizona, where she runs a science and technology library. The author's first story for us, "Point of Origin," appeared in our August 2005 issue. She returns to our pages with a haunting look at why you can't go home again, especially when home has become a . . .

# GHOST TOWN

Catherine Wells

A shiver slid over Kaye when she saw the bright yellow house on the edge of town. It looked the same. What right did it have to look the same? The trees had grown taller, of course, and the hedge had filled in, but the toolshed still squatted by the garden patch, and the second-floor deck clung like a scaffold to the eastern side. A person would never know her parents no longer lived there, and hadn't for nearly ten years. How could it be that her home was no longer her home?

Her rental car glided silently over the pockmarked pavement, ignoring the defects caused by freezing winters and melting snow. Cars had not been this quiet, nor this smooth, when she had left to join the first crewed expedition to leave the solar system. Lowering her window, she listened for the sounds she remembered: the call of a meadowlark, the creaking of crickets, the crunch of tires on the gravel that spilled from dirt shoulders onto the street. But the birds and insects were silent, and her rental car rode on a plasma stream, not wheels. That had been new technology when she left, fourteen years ago. Fourteen years for everyone she'd left behind.

Only two years for her.

The yellow house passed out of view, and she slowed to make the turn into town. With less wind noise, she finally heard other sounds: a bird call at last, a katydid's dry trill, the rustle of carrigana leaves as she passed a large hedge. Yet it all seemed off somehow, as though the orchestra were missing its woodwinds or its first violins. Where was the ambient noise of a small community? The buzz of a lawn tractor? The slam of a screen door? The voices of children at play?

Rounding the corner, she glanced at the quiet house there, a house where she used to play with her friend Jocelyn. The willow tree wept as profusely as ever, but the tree swing was long gone, the sandbox vanished. Maybe there were no children here anymore. The local school had closed while Kaye was still a child, and it was either home schooling or—as her parents had chosen—a two-hour bus ride to a larger town. This wasn't the place to raise children now. Not enough socialization. Not enough kids for a softball game. Who still lived in this tiny village called Jubilee? Even her family had gone, though the Halstads had settled here before it had a name. *I shouldn't have come*, she thought for the hundredth time. *There's nothing here for me.*

Her sister Rita had insisted they meet here. "I've got a surprise for you! Meet me in front of the old post office," she had instructed. Though Kaye had suspected it was a bad idea, she didn't know how to tell Rita that. Rita had been twenty-one when Kaye shipped out, just finishing her bachelor's degree and crying because Kaye wouldn't be there for her graduation. But it was only supposed to be two years. She wasn't supposed to miss Rita's wedding, too, and the birth of her twins, and her divorce, and her promotion to VP of Human Resources. The Razavi stabilizer was supposed to negate the Doppler effect on the revolutionary faster-than-light spacecraft. It had been tested time and again before they sent humans outside the solar system.

The house at the end of the block looked odd to her eye. The Moores' place had always been white and unkempt, a working man's house. Now the lawn had been trimmed up, the rambling foliage neatly pruned, and the house painted a fashionable shade of cinnamon. She wondered if the Moores had moved away, and who lived there now. Someone must—the place looked so tidy. Too tidy. She tried not to shudder as she turned another corner.

Around a bend and up a short hill sat the yellow house. An ache filled her as she approached; she wanted to walk through it once more, to see the familiar furniture in the living room, to have one final look at all the dishes and curios in the hutch. She wanted to help her mother with the packing, to load the linens into cartons, to box up the files from Dad's office, to sort through the cartons of games and toys, the detritus of her childhood. She wanted to put it all to rest. But a strange vehicle was parked in the driveway and she glided past, knowing it was too late. Her parents had closed the family store ten years ago and moved to Jamestown, where they could still make a living. Someone else lived in the yellow house now. Someone she had never met.

Taking a deep breath, she left the house behind and drove slowly up the three blocks to the old post office. The absence of cars on the streets felt spooky. True, there had never been many even when she was growing up here, but shouldn't there be some parked somewhere, at least? She craved the scenes of her youth: A stakebed truck at the lone gas pump. A pickup parked outside Mort's Bar. Two cars stopped in the middle of the street, their windows rolled down as the drivers talked to each other and spit the shells of sunflower seeds out onto the road. This was eerie, as if aliens had abducted the inhabitants, or the Rapture had taken them all away to Glory.

*But it's not the town, it's me, she realized. I'm the alien. I'm the ghost, a shade from the past. Maybe I'm not really here, just a restless spirit wandering back to haunt the places where I grew up—*

Then she spotted Rita's cheery little Upstart coupe just up the street, parked in front of the tiny building that had once been Jubilee's post office. The car gleamed in the afternoon sun, not a speck of dust on it. Why was there no dust on it? This was farmland, and the wind whistling over the fields should have put a fine layer of Dakota dirt on everything that passed through. But some new technology gave cars the ability to shed dust the way a duck shed water. As Kaye climbed out of her rental car, she realized it, too, was clean and sparkling.

*I'm the one with the dust*, she thought, and had an image of herself emerging from some overgrown tomb. She felt as if cobwebs clung to her, slowing her movements, slowing her wits.

The old post office building had been a subdued cream color when Kaye was growing up, worthy of a government office. Now it was a vibrant chartreuse and sported a holographic sign that read "Lacey's Gifts." As she stared at it, the door flew open, setting off a tinkling of shop bells, and out bounced Rita. Blond like Kaye, she sported a short haircut and artful makeup. Fashionable clothes hugged a body that was fit-looking without losing its softness, designed for the boardroom and not a spacecraft's grav-deck. Kaye's own muscles were toughened by physical labor and rigorous conditioning, granting her an economy of movement that was more efficient than graceful. Even now, with no reason to stay in shape, she kept at it. Her career was as stunted as her emotions: who would put her on another spacecraft, with her outmoded skills and archaic knowledge? But using her muscles kept her grounded, made her feel she was connected to something. To her own body, at least.

"Lovesy!" Rita squealed, rushing to give Kaye a hug. It was a term that had come into fashion recently, and it made Kaye want to vomit. But she smiled wanly and returned her sister's embrace, if with less enthusiasm. This was supposed to be her younger sister, the one she had tutored in math and warned against the dangers of letting a boy put his hand on your knee. The one she had yelled at for losing her favorite hairbrush and sworn to secrecy when she slipped out to meet Dusty Watson. Rita was now thirty-five years old with two kids and an MBA; Kaye was just twenty-six.

"Isn't this cute, what Lacey has done with the old Post Office?" Rita gushed.

Kaye glanced at the building again and her stomach did a slow roll. "Yeah, cute. What's this surprise you have for me?" *And why couldn't you have given it to me at Mom and Dad's condo in Jamestown, where I didn't have to see all of this?*

"It's this way. Come on!" Rita took her hand and led Kaye up the street a dozen yards to a small stuccoed building that fronted directly on the sidewalk.

Kaye blinked as she tried to recall it. "Grandma Olsen's house, right?" She remembered the stack of old board games her friend's grandmother had kept in a closet, and how they had played those old games for hours on lazy summer afternoons. "I don't suppose she still lives here."

"No," Rita said smugly. "I do."

Kaye blinked again and tried to make sense of the information. "You live here? In Jubilee?"

"No, silly! This is my vacation house, my private retreat. When the twins go to visit their dad, or when I get loaded down at work, I pop out here to relax." Her smile turned a bit wistful. "I sleep better out here."

Kaye was trying to imagine relaxing in a town that felt so empty.

"Come on inside," Rita urged, opening the door.

But Kaye balked, staring at another piece of her childhood now twisted out of shape. Its doorway gaped like the maw of some beast that would devour her, trapping her in an alien place from which she could never return—

*Fool! You are already there. Your world is gone, changed, and you can never return to it. This is the only reality that's left.*

"Kaye? Honey, are you all right?" Rita asked anxiously.

Kaye looked up into her sister's face, a face that looked too much like her mother's and not enough like the teenager she remembered. "I—I just need a minute," she stammered. "This whole time-warp thing is just—" Turning, she staggered to a nearby lightpole, catching it with both hands.

"Oh—" Distress colored Rita's voice. "I thought you'd like to see it again. You know, a chance to—"

Kaye waved her off. "It's okay, it's fine. I just need a little time." *I need the fourteen years I was robbed of.*

As she sucked in deep breaths of fresh, prairie air, a soft whine sounded in the distance. In the east, a small aircraft sliced through the cloud-flecked skies, and she supposed it was headed for the airstrip at Meyers' farm. Or did they even have an airstrip anymore, now that hover-landers were so prevalent? As she watched, it bore down on the town, the whine changing pitch as it drew closer. For a moment she thought it would pass by to the north, but then it banked left and started a steep, swift descent. Definitely a hover-lander.

The pilot was good, dropping gracefully on jets of air into the area Kaye remembered as the city park. A postage stamp of a park that had never had a picnic table, let alone restrooms—just a couple of swingsets and a big grassy area for throwing a Frisbee or a football around. Was there a hoverpad there now? Who would use it? Relatives, visiting someone in town? Someone like Rita, maybe, who had a "private retreat" here, someone from Chicago, or Winnipeg. Mom had told her half the houses in town had been bought by people who liked to hunt and fish. A town of pioneers, of tradesmen and farmers who wrestled a living from the stingy land, reduced now to the sometime-population of sportsmen on vacation.

"I wonder who that is?" Rita echoed her thoughts. Then, like any small-town busybody, she raised her com-bracelet and asked it to check the registration. "It's a commercial aircraft out of White Sands," she reported as the answer danced in the air above the bracelet. "ExSol?" She shot her sister a worried look.

Kaye sighed heavily. "Most likely. They like to check up on me."

Rita's face tightened. "Since when?"

"Since Chip Grayson went to a family reunion and burned down thirty-odd people."

Repatriation had not gone well for the nine astronauts who suffered the unexpected time distortion. When the mission had not returned in the allotted time, ExSol—the Extra Solar division of the International Space Alliance—had stalled for eighteen months while it sent follow-up probes, trying to locate its missing spacecraft. But finally it had declared the vessel lost with all hands. Funerals were held, families and friends grieved, and then they moved on. Children grew up, spouses remarried. Six months ago, when Kaye and her crewmates suddenly reappeared, what they came back to had been enough to overtax even healthy psyches. Not only had their families aged and their world changed, but their legal status had been terminated and their assets disbursed. Coming back from the dead was a bureaucratic nightmare that still had not been resolved. Two of the crew had sought refuge under the headstones erected for them in their absence. Grayson had put most of his extended family there instead.

“But you don’t have that kind of problem!” Rita protested. “You’re adjusting well. I mean, really well, considering everything.”

*Considering I feel like a wraith.* “Doesn’t mean they don’t worry about me,” Kaye said. *And maybe they should.* She kept dreaming she could reverse her trip and everything would be all right, that she would come home and find nothing changed. What if she woke up one morning and believed it? What if she tried to come home to the yellow house on the edge of Jubilee and, finding strangers there, thought they were intruders and did them some harm?

“How did they even know you were here, though?” Rita asked.

“Implant.” Kaye tapped her wrist where a slight bulge showed the location of a subcutaneous transmitter. For two years, the ship’s computer had monitored her vital functions, her whereabouts on the vessel; now the same implant continued to transmit her bio-readings, her location, her communications, her entertainment choices, every transaction she made. *Just like a small town*, she thought wryly. *There are no secrets.*

Rita’s eyes narrowed, and Kaye could almost smell her corporate HR training rising to the surface. “How much longer do you have to have that in?”

“Till hell freezes over, I imagine.”

“Kaye, they can’t do that. There are privacy laws.”

Kaye knew that, knew she could protest, file a complaint, but what did it matter? Having the chip removed, would she be any less an alien in her own world? And what if she *did* snap one day? “It’s okay,” she told Rita. “It makes Mom feel better, knowing someone’s looking out for me. Making sure I don’t walk on the tracks when the bullet train is due.”

Rita’s blue eyes clouded over, and Kaye knew her sister was on the verge of tears. Sometimes she thought this was harder on her family than on her. It was one thing to have believed her dead; it was something else to have her returned to them so wounded. She saw the pain in her parents’ eyes every time they looked at her. They wanted her to recover, to be better, and she just couldn’t be. She didn’t know how.

Turning back to the open door of the house, Kaye knew she should go in, knew she should pretend for Rita’s sake that she was still the bright,



self-assured, enthusiastic woman who had joined ExSol, eager for adventure, confident life was an array of possibilities. For Rita's sake, she would try. "Come on, let's go in," she said, forcing herself to move toward the door. "Show me what you've done."

"Kaye Halstad?"

She stopped with her foot on the threshold, quietly relieved she did not have to cross it. Looking up, she saw a man striding down the sidewalk toward them wearing, not an ExSol jumpsuit or even an ExSol pullover, but blue jeans and a plaid shirt open at the collar, sleeves rolled up. He was young, perhaps in his late twenties, with dark hair just long enough to curl a bit, giving it an unruly appearance. For a moment she wondered if this was just a local who had wandered by, and she tried to see in his face someone she might have grown up with. One of the Schultz boys? A Berger? How old would they be now?

"Can we help you?" Rita asked archly, taking a protective step in front of Kaye. *Like a mother protecting her child*, Kaye thought. *Only this is my kid sister*. The wrongness of it chilled her.

"Dan Leighton-Schmidt," the stranger introduced himself, offering his hand. "You must be Rita." His face was narrow with a slightly pointed chin, and his smile made creases around his mouth and eyes. Ignoring the open suspicion on Rita's face, he turned to Kaye, and his smile faded inexplicably. For a long moment he just looked at her.

It took her that long to remember her manners. Mechanically, she stretched out a hand. "I'm Kaye. But you probably knew that."

He hesitated before taking her hand, and she thought irrationally, *I am a ghost*. But her palm did not pass through his as she shook it, and his grip felt firm and confident. "Yeah, I knew," he said. "I stopped by your parents' house—they told me you were out here. I have to be back at White Sands tonight, so I took the liberty of hunting you down. I hope you don't mind."

"Since when does ExSol apologize for tracking me down?"

He looked startled. "ExSol? Oh, no, I'm not— God, no. I'm—" He gave an exasperated sigh, thrust his hands into his pockets, and looked away. Then, turning back, he said, "I'm an astronaut. Like you. But I don't work for ExSol."

Curious, she cocked an eyebrow and eyed him more carefully. "Commercial outfit?"

"KRJ. I'm part of the *Odyssey* crew."

The name thudded like a brick on her psyche. The *Odyssey* was a colony ship, headed for the very extrasolar planet Kaye and her crewmates had reached. They had spent three months in a base camp there as they started terraforming projects to run independently after they left. Now the *Odyssey* planned to return and see if it had worked, see if a settlement there could be self-sustaining. She wondered what they would find. Would her sacrifice have been for nothing?

"Good luck," she told him. "I hope we accomplished something, at least."

"Accomp—" His hands came out of his pockets. "Of course, you accomplished something!"

She snorted. "You'll hardly know that till you get there."

"You made a safe landing," he insisted. "You proved the atmosphere was

breathable, the gravity tolerable. You set up the power station, got the terraforming started— I wouldn't be going if it weren't for you. None of us would."

She sighed. "Once you get there, you may not thank me."

For a moment he stared at her. Then his jaw twisted and he thrust his hands back in his pockets. "Yeah, you're probably right. It probably won't occur to us. We forget. We forget how much we owe to the ones who came before us." He nodded toward the empty streets of Jubilee. "Like the people who homesteaded here. Did we ever thank them? Do we even think about it, a hundred years and more removed? Naaa. We just grumble about—" He shrugged. "Having to drive sixty-five miles to a doctor. Riding a school bus for two hours. Waiting days for spare parts to be shipped out to us. All the inconveniences of being out in the sticks. But where would we be, I wonder, if they hadn't built these little towns? Who would we be, if we hadn't grown up in places like this?"

*Who would we be . . .* "Are you from Jubilee?" Kaye asked in confusion, searching his face again, trying to see something familiar there. Such pale blue eyes, with curling lashes that looked like they belonged on a girl . . .

But he shook his head. "Not Jubilee," he said. "Another town just like it. A little bigger, maybe, but dying just the same. Like hundreds of other little towns all over this country."

"It's not dying!" Rita snapped. "It's changing, that's all."

He made a mock bow in her direction. "*Mea culpa*. Changing, you're right. Still places worth living in; just harder to make a living in."

"Like it was ever easy."

His laugh was tinged with bitterness. "*Touché*." He shuffled his feet. "Look, I didn't come here to argue. I just wanted—" He hesitated. "I just wanted to shake your hand, I guess. Let you know that at least one of your fellow North Dakotans appreciates what you did."

"A lot of us appreciate—" Rita began, but Kaye put a restraining hand on her arm.

"Rita, he's trying to be nice." She studied his face again, finding it familiar in a way, yet no name or place came to her, no image of him as a boy. "When do you leave?" she asked.

"Eleven months, in theory. They're still trying to fill a couple of berths."

Berths. The single word triggered a flood of memories: webbed cocoons slung between alloy frames; a metallic odor overlaid with the pungent scent of unwashed bodies; the hum of the electrical systems. How exciting it had been on the way out! And then, how dull. Endless days of nothing but exercise, study, and monotonous chores. Reading schematics, checking instruments. The same people, the same games, and never enough to keep them occupied. "You'll be at each other's throats," she warned.

"We've been told."

The days at the base station had been the best. With so much work to do, grievances had been forgotten. Fresh air and enough room to swing your arms helped. She had bathed in a pond, stark naked and warmed by an alien sun. Setting up the water purification station had been her project, the pond its fruit. She wondered if it was still clean and clear and blue— "We were sorry to leave," she said. "Mostly, we were sorry to climb

back into that sardine can for the return trip. If we had known what we were coming back to . . ." What? What would they have done? Stayed there?

That's what the crew of the *Odyssey* would do, if the planet could sustain them. "Do you have family?" she asked.

"Mom and dad, one brother. Grandparents."

"You know you'll never see them again."

"Maybe." He forced a grin and shrugged. "The way technology is advancing, maybe not. Maybe we'll be making routine trips back and forth by the time my kids are born."

"Not likely."

"No." He shrugged again. "No different than the people who settled this prairie."

That was true. They'd left homes, families behind—but that was a choice they had made. Kaye hadn't made that choice. Oh, she had known there was a risk of mission failure, of being stranded on an alien world, of dying—but she hadn't expected to lose fourteen years. If only it weren't there in her face every day, if only she didn't have to see the things that were the same and yet not the same—

Suddenly her pulse quickened. "You say there are berths left?" she asked.

Beside her, Rita stiffened. "Kaye—!"

The man before them looked startled, then wary. "Well, they have applicants, it's just— They're looking for specific skills."

"You can't!" Rita said fiercely, seizing her elbow. "You just got back!"

Hope rose and died in a heartbeat, then rose and died again. "They wouldn't want me," Kaye said sadly. "My skills are old. Obsolete." On Earth, anyway. But the base station she had helped set up—she knew that station and its equipment. She knew its quirks and its limitations. She knew the geology of the planet, its hydrology and its weather, not from images and files but from walking its soil and breathing its air. That kind of experience had to be worth something.

"Is this why you came here?" Rita demanded of their visitor. "To try to recruit her?"

"No!" Anger flashed in his eyes, those pale blue eyes with the curling lashes—

In a flash, it came back to her. "Danny Schmidt?" she asked. She had taught school for a year while she waited for her application to ExSol to be processed. Junior high math and science, in a small school in Pembina County. Danny Schmidt had been an awkward, pimple-faced boy of fourteen, always stuffing his hands in his pockets like that, shrugging his shoulders—except when he played basketball. He was good at basketball.

Now he rolled his eyes, embarrassed. "Guilty," he admitted. Then, "I didn't think you'd remember me."

"Sure you did," Rita said angrily. "That's why you came. You came to see if you could sucker her into another untested, unsafe—"

"No!" he snarled, eyes flashing again, and Kaye realized that was what she remembered, that temper. In a game against their arch rivals, he'd lost his cool and been called for a technical foul, ejected from the game. His hands came out of his pockets now. "I told you, I just—" Abruptly he

stuffed the anger down inside somewhere; his hands went back into his pockets as he turned to Kaye, his eyes pleading. "I hated math, till you taught it. I never dreamed of being an astronaut, till you—" He shook his head. "Forget it. This was a mistake." Turning away, he headed back up the street toward the park, shoulders hunched, and Kaye saw again that adolescent boy, trudging off the basketball court toward the locker room, sure he had spoiled his team's chance of winning.

"Danny," she called.

He stopped and looked back at her.

"Say your farewells," she told him. "And mean it."

He considered that for a moment. Then, "You, too," he said. Turning once more, he walked away.

Rita faced her sister now and clutched at Kaye's shoulders. "You can't be thinking of this," she said urgently. "Kaye, you can't!"

"I'm not," Kaye lied. They wouldn't want her. Her mental state was too fragile. She was a ghost.

But she couldn't go on gazing at the present and wanting the past. Danny was right: she had to say good-bye. To Jubilee. To her kid sister. Maybe to Earth.

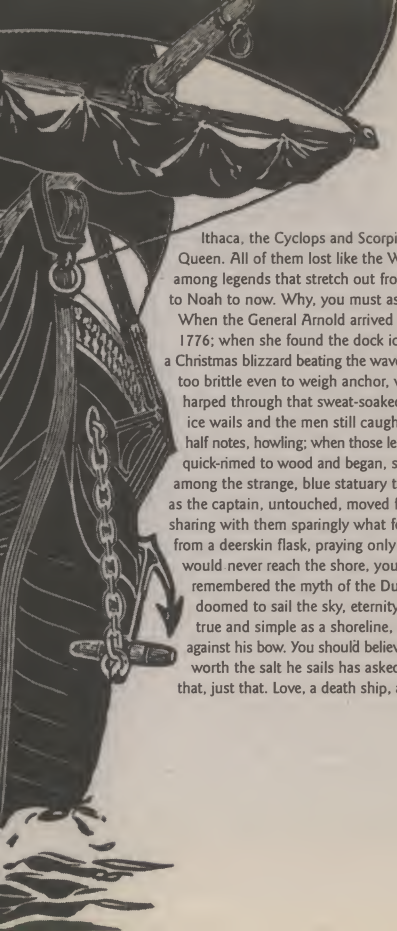
"Promise me you won't go!" Rita cried, throwing her arms around Kaye. "I won't lose you again!"

*Too late, little sister . . .*

And as she returned the embrace, Kaye felt her sister warm and substantial at last. The summer sun warmed her back, and the scent of late-blooming lilacs reached her. Nearby, a meadowlark chimed his familiar song, and she savored them all, savored this moment of home and family, before it passed away forever. "Come on," she said, her throat tight with emotion. "Show me this house of yours. I want to see what you've done with it." ○

## THE FLYING DUTCHMAN

The seaworthiness of your craft has never been the issue. Nor trim, nor mast, ballast or destination. What tack you take, the uterine grit of sea foam, each tern that haunts your wake hectoring after scraps . . . None of these alone matter. The question is more one of undertaking. Why should you desire to go? How many journeys have ended with never coming home? The Mary Celeste was found, all hands unaccounted for, adrift in its Sargasso bed and rank with weeds, her hold barred against invasion. John and Mary, the Rubicon, neither finished their crossing. Abandoned. And then the missing . . . Milton,



Ithaca, the Cyclops and Scorpion, the Sulphur Queen. All of them lost like the Witchcraft, vanished among legends that stretch out from Utnapishtim to Noah to now. Why, you must ask yourself, bother? When the General Arnold arrived at Plymouth harbor, 1776; when she found the dock ice-locked, a Christmas blizzard beating the waves to plow blades, chains too brittle even to weigh anchor, when the winds harped through that sweat-soaked rigging like melancholy ice wails and the men still caught in them froze there, half notes, howling; when those left on deck found their feet quick-rimed to wood and began, slowly, to lose themselves among the strange, blue statuary they had become; as the captain, untouched, moved from man to man, sharing with them sparingly what few spirits were left from a deerskin flask, praying only that their screams would never reach the shore, you must believe he too remembered the myth of the Dutchman forever doomed to sail the sky, eternity unmoored, till love, true and simple as a shoreline, were to tap against his bow. You should believe this as well: no seaman worth the salt he sails has asked for anything but that, just that. Love, a death ship, and a star to sink her by.

—Bryan D. Dietrich

# STRANGERS WHEN WE MEET

Kate Wilhelm

Each of this grand master's four previous publications in *Asimov's* has been memorable. Three, "With Thimbles, With Forks, and Hope" (November 1981); "The Gorgon Field" (August 1985); and "I Know What You're Thinking" (November 1994), were nominated for major awards, and the fourth, "The Girl Who Fell Into the Sky" (October 1986), brought home the Nebula. These days, she tells us, she leads a quiet life gardening and spending time with friends, family, and cats. Not long ago, she marked the fiftieth anniversary of her first short story's ("The Mile-Long Spaceship") selection for one of the Year's Best anthologies. "I bought a portable typewriter with the money I got for it, the same typewriter I had rented to try to get a decent final copy in the first place." The bittersweet tale that follows shows us how fortunate it is for all of us that she's still writing as much as ever.

Edith Dreisser cursed under her breath when a gust of wind blew rain into her face as she struggled to close her umbrella before entering the restaurant. The hostess met her with a sympathetic smile and took the umbrella.

"I'm to meet Dr. Lipsheim," Edith said, taking off her dripping raincoat. The hostess took that, too, and hung it up.

"Dr. Dreisser? He's expecting you. This way, please." She led the way through the dining room, sparsely occupied that late in the afternoon, to a corner booth.

Cal rose to greet her. He was smiling broadly, both hands outstretched to take hers as he bent to kiss her cheek. "Edie, you're looking wonderful, as usual. And you're cold. Irish coffee? Just to take the chill off?"



She grinned and nodded. Cal was seventy or seventy-one, tall and spare, and balder every time she saw him. And he knew how to take off a chill.

He sent the hostess away after telling her to order them both an Irish coffee.

"It was so good of you to come on such short notice," Cal said, resuming his seat across the booth from her.

"You know perfectly well that an invitation from you is a royal summons," she said. He had been her advisor, her mentor, and she had worked briefly in the hospital where he had since become the head of the neurology department. She was a research neurophysiologist, or a psychiatrist, depending on which hat she happened to be wearing. Now she had her own graduate students toiling away at her behest. She doubted they would ever hold her in the same kind of near reverence she felt for Cal.

He handed her a menu. "Let's order when they get around to bringing our coffees," he said. "Then they'll leave us alone for a time."

She had suspected that he had something on his mind other than getting together with an old friend, but she knew there was no point in trying to get to it before he was ready. She consulted the menu.

After a waiter brought the coffee and took their order, Cal said, "I read your piece in the *APA Review*. Very good work. It got a buzz, didn't it?"

Before she could respond, he continued in a thoughtful way, "Mapping the brain. Not a new idea, of course, but a new approach. Like peeling an onion and mapping each segment as you come to it. No one's done that adequately before. How's it coming?"

"Slowly," she admitted. "Perhaps an impossible task, ambitious but not doable. The problem with student subjects is that the little wretches' brains are all different, and just when I think I'm getting ahead, the brat gets terminally bored, or else leaves."

Cal laughed softly. "The joys of brain research." He sipped his coffee.

"Drop in at the lab some day and have a look at the model I'm constructing. It's pretty awesome."

Their food arrived and they chatted about the unseasonable May weather, the worsening traffic day by day in Portland, things inconsequential. Abruptly, Cal pushed his plate back with most of his crab cakes remaining, and he leaned forward.

"Keep eating," he said, "while I tell you a story. Let me tell it all and then we can talk about it." He didn't wait for her nod. "Two weeks ago," he said, "there was an accident on the Interstate—a propane tanker overturned, exploded, and killed several people. You may recall it from the news. It turned out that a family of three was involved. Donna Hardesty, her son Travis, and her twenty-five-year-old daughter Rebecca. Mrs. Hardesty and Travis were killed. Rebecca escaped with a head injury, a concussion, and some abrasions and bruises. She was brought to the hospital unconscious, treated and held overnight for evaluation. The following day when she woke up, the doctor on duty examined her and told her that her mother and brother had both died. She became hysterical and had to be quieted with a tranquilizer, but she spent the rest of the day and evening in a state of shock. Typical post-traumatic shock reaction. They kept her a second night, and on the following day she was told a sec-

ond time about the death of her family, with the same reaction. She refused food, and drank so little that they were compelled to start an IV for fluids. The third day was another repeat. They called me at that time."

Edith had taken a bite or two as he talked, but then put her fork down and concentrated on what he was saying. "Post trauma amnesia?"

He nodded. "With a vengeance. Edie, that girl is unable to remember from one day to the next—a period of roughly twenty-four hours. We've run the usual tests, all negative, no overlooked brain trauma. I made up a story that satisfied her about why she was in the hospital. She has no memory of the accident and whatever she is told on day one is forgotten on day two."

Edith leaned back and drew in a long breath. "How long has it been now?"

"Thirteen days. She's twenty-five, twenty-six in June, and has a perfectly normal memory of everything until the day of the accident. She's highly intelligent, due to start graduate studies in paleontology, at your university, by the way. And, frankly, we don't know what to do with her. She can't remain in the hospital, and she can't be turned loose."

"Family, other than the immediate ones?"

"No. Her father died when she was sixteen. He had pancreatic cancer, and his death was a relief to everyone, including him, I imagine. Her mother had no living relatives, and we haven't been able to find anyone else. There's an attorney handling her affairs, her mother's attorney. There's some money, a residence to be sold, life insurance, and there will be more due to the collision. But Rebecca can't live alone, not with daily amnesia for yesterday."

He paused, then said, "We had a staff meeting to discuss an institution, a halfway house, a constant home attendant, companion. Anything. She's very intelligent, as I said, and every single day she needs an explanation about why she's where she is. She wants to go back to school, finish her studies."

"What story did you tell her?"

He rubbed his eyes. "I told her that she had dropped off her mother and brother at the airport, which was the plan originally, and that she had driven back to her quad. There was a gas explosion, she was injured, her car totaled, and the quad was damaged and would have to undergo repairs. She accepted it since she had nothing to put in its place. I, or someone else, has told her that same story every day since then. Nine days in a row."

"Good God," Edith said.

He was watching her closely as he said, "What your research needs is a standard, textbook brain, one that doesn't change with the changing seasons, a single brain that you can map layer by layer until you unravel the whole enchilada."

"Cal, I can't take on your patient."

"You can. House her in one of those apartments behind the psych building. Make her a research assistant." He picked up a folder that had been on the bench next to him and laid it on the table. "Everything we've learned about her, complete medical record, schools, everything. Read it overnight and come meet her tomorrow, and then decide."

She shook her head. "Cal, no one can protect her outside an institution."

On campus there are people who know her, who would commiserate, mention the accident, her mother and brother. Hysterical reaction, a trip to a mental institution—what? Will she notice the change of season? End of school year? That she failed to graduate? Until she can deal with the truth, she'll need a constantly changing story to satisfy her about her situation." She shook her head harder.

"Exactly," Cal said. "That's why a hired attendant wouldn't really work. Someone who understands the whole situation is called for, a professional. Edie, commencement will be in another week, the campus will empty out, her friends will be gone. I'll keep her until after the graduation ceremony. Then, as time passes the accident will fade from memory and there will be less and less likelihood of anyone ever mentioning it. We can come up with a new story for her, and she would be safe there. No one talking to her would ever suspect her amnesia. She's engaging, witty, smart, and she should not be locked away."

When she still didn't touch the folder, he added, "Edie, perhaps you can cure her, or find the trigger that shuts down the memory. Perhaps a method to help others recover from amnesia." More softly he said, "Think of what it would mean to have one brain to work with, one that doesn't get bored, doesn't leave. You could get to the center with such a brain."

The first two or three days would be the worst, Keith Adams told himself, leaving the Interstate to head to the condo where his mother and stepfather lived. He could hold up for a few days without any trouble, just smile and nod a lot. The problem was that Theodore Zoelich, his stepfather, had turned into a nut since his buy-out retirement, and his mother was stuck on a single refrain. She wanted a grandchild, and Keith was the only route to gaining one. Theodore was bored. Only sixty-two, early retirement, not a golfer or a fisherman, not a gambler, no discernible hobby interest, he had discovered conspiracies, and he saw them wherever he turned his gaze, or more recently, his telescope. Two or three days, Keith repeated under his breath. Smile. Nod.

For the past year Keith had taught earth science in a small obscure college in Idaho Falls, and the year before he had taught it in Wyoming, both one-year contracts. But Faye, his mother, always introduced him as a university professor, and in private asked in a brightly interested, non-prying way how his dissertation was coming. If her desire could make it happen, he would be teaching geniuses at Harvard, but in fact he had not touched the dissertation in the past two years.

It went more or less the way he had anticipated. Faye fluttered about, packing, repacking, making sure he had their car keys, the key to the cabin on the coast. She gave him their itinerary twice, and he didn't remind her that she had emailed it twice before. When he admired her hair, which she was letting go gray since Theodore's retirement, she said, "Well, you know how important it is for a grandchild to have a gray-haired grandma baking cookies for him."

"Mother, you don't know how to bake cookies."

"I can learn." See how far I'm willing to go to do my part, she implied by an arch look. He smiled.

"Keith, come see," Theodore called from the living room where he had set up his telescope. "I want you to see for yourself what I've been talking about. Those men are going into the building. Just watch." He turned the telescope over to Keith and picked up binoculars.

"Military," Theodore said. "Can't disguise military. I can tell every time."

The condo was a dozen blocks from the university, with a clear view of several university buildings through openings between trees. Keith focused without moving the telescope. Two men in gray suits were striding toward the building.

"Professors," he said.

"No way. Professors don't dress like that, don't walk like that. They slouch. And they don't have haircuts like that."

"Auditors, insurance adjustors, board of director members. They could be anyone."

"Military. The one on the left, he came last week, and now he's back with his superior. Nine in the morning like today. The first one went in, stayed an hour and marched out. And now he's back. They're up to something."

Smile, Keith thought, moving away from the telescope as the two men entered the building many blocks away.

Theodore glanced toward the other end of the living room and lowered his voice. "I want you to keep a log for me. Be on duty at nine, and again at ten to eleven. Now and then through the day. But especially in the morning. Keep a record for me. Something's going on and I could be the only one to suspect, but we have this goddamn trip planned and she'd have my scalp if I cancelled out."

Keith nodded. "Sure. No problem." Cancel! No way. He would promise to stand on his head in downtown Portland an hour a day if that's what it would take to get them on their plane the next morning. They planned to visit Theodore's east coast relatives for a week, spend a week in New York City, then fly to London to start a six-week vacation in Europe. Her lifelong dream vacation, Faye had called it.

He had eight weeks to plan his next move. Everything he owned was now in the condo, his nine-year-old Honda parked outside, his bike locked in a rack in the rear of the building, and there was no job in sight. Spying for an hour a day was a small price to pay for eight weeks of freedom, eight weeks to consider his future. He smiled again, and nodded.

He did his spying daily for the next week, as promised, and jotted down his results. Zilch. After fulfilling his duty, he often walked or rode his bike on the university grounds, winding in and out among the many buildings, visiting the library, the student union, and he realized he missed it all. The small colleges where he had taught would fit, grounds and all, in a corner of this campus. Not many students were about, just graduate students, a few summer session attendees, visitors. On that afternoon during his second week at home, he spotted a girl, woman—he corrected himself—whom he had seen several times either entering or leaving the building he now knew housed the psychology department. It was the same building the two men in suits had entered.

He got off his bike and walked it toward her. She was slender, five five,

with shiny chestnut colored hair, short with a little curl. That was what he had noticed when he saw her through the lens of the telescope, shiny beautiful hair. The rest of her was as lovely as her hair, he realized, drawing near.

"Hi," he said.

She glanced at him and smiled tentatively without speaking. She was carrying a paleontology textbook, one he recognized, and he nodded toward it. "I noticed the fossil book," he said. "We used that a few times."

"You're studying paleontology, too?"

"Archeology. We had to read a couple of chapters about fossils. Make sure we could tell the difference between bones and hand-worked stones or something."

She laughed. "The bones are more elegant."

"And more likely to have teeth marks."

She asked if he was a student here, and he found himself telling her about the two schools where he had taught. They both laughed when he said the students couldn't handle it if they called the course archeology, it had to be earth science.

"At least you have your master's. Did you go here before you decided to teach?"

"Oregon State. Down in Corvallis. Where are you heading?"

"Nowhere in particular. Exercise. Maybe get a smoothie, or ice cream."

They walked and talked and laughed often. She told him that her mother lived in Silverton, not far from Salem, and about the gas explosion that had wrecked her car and the quad she had been living in. "It seems that I developed some kind of amnesia after the explosion and it's finally clearing up. Enough to let me finish one last paper and go into the graduate program in the fall. The quad's closed for renovations and they let me stay in an apartment on campus for now. Study, work in the psych lab for Dr. Dreisser, catch up. It keeps me pretty busy. As soon as they finish work on the quad I'll move back there. Another few days, probably."

"I'm house sitting for my folks this summer while they vacation in Rome, Paris, all those good places. Lucky stiff."

They had reached the student union building, where they both had raspberry smoothies, and afterward started back to the psych building. "I should be out sifting dirt looking for trilobites or something," she said in mock distress. "How I spent last summer. Cooler in the lab."

"I should be looking for a job," he said, and changed the subject to movies.

Much too soon they had retraced their steps and approached her building. "I'm Keith, by the way," he said belatedly.

"Rebecca," she said. "I have to go back to work."

"See you tomorrow? About eleven, like today? Another smoothie or something?"

She smiled and nodded. "That would be nice. So long, Keith."

He watched her open the door to the building and enter before he got on his bike and started to pedal away. Tomorrow, he told himself, and realized he was grinning like an idiot.

The next day she didn't show up. He waited until after two, then rode back to the condo. For three days he repeated this, then decided her quad

must have reopened and she probably had moved. He didn't know which quad, and he didn't even know her last name. Just Rebecca.

Every day he fulfilled his duty at the telescope. No military, no suits, a few slouches, a few students. No Rebecca. He noted it in Theodore's notebook.

Then she appeared again. It was later than before, after four. He dashed from the condo, got on his bike and raced to the student union building. She was at an outside table with a smoothie before her, engrossed in the paleontology textbook.

He walked his bike to the table and said, "Hi, again."

She looked up almost absently, keeping her finger on a line in the book. Her smile was more tentative than before. She nodded.

"Have you moved back into the quad?" he asked.

"Is it finished?" she asked eagerly. "All done?"

"Don't you know?"

She shook her head. "I thought that's what you were going to tell me, that it's ready."

"I waited for you," he said, bewildered by her attitude, her distance, treating him like a complete stranger, one she was not interested in.

Her face was very mobile, her expression changing rapidly to reflect whatever she was feeling. Her polite expression changed, registered even more distance and caution as she looked at him with a frown. "Why? When?"

"Yesterday, the day before, the day before that."

She shook her head and closed the book with a snap. "Sorry, Mister. Wrong line."

"Rebecca! Don't you even remember me?"

"I never saw you before in my life! If you don't leave, I'll yell for security and charge you with stalking. Get lost!"

She jumped up and walked away swiftly, and he sat down hard at the little table.

It didn't make any sense, he told himself that night, pacing angrily. She had enjoyed talking with him, he knew she had, just as much as he had enjoyed being with her. The way they had laughed at the same things, that hadn't been fake. Her easy laughter, that had been real. Instant rapport. Revealing things about themselves, something he had never done before, and her reserve had lessened as they talked. He hadn't even thought to give her his cell phone number, or to get hers. They were to meet again, no call necessary.

That brush-off hadn't been fake either. He had to accept her rejection. She really had not recognized him, remembered him, or else she was one of the greatest actresses ever.

And why wasn't she out sifting dirt looking for fossils instead of working in a psych lab? He stopped moving. A double major? She had not mentioned anything like that. Dreisser. She had mentioned Dr. Dreisser.

He went to his laptop and looked up Dreissers, sorted through until he found Edith Dreisser at the university, then settled in to read about her. Brain research. Neurophysiology, psychiatry.



What did that have to do with a paleontology major? As an undergraduate, with lots of science and math, plus the other required classes, there couldn't have been much time to spend in the psych lab. And with little or no training in research techniques in the field of psychology, what could she do? File clerk? Gofer? She had a key to the outer door, he remembered. They didn't hand out keys to flunkies. He shook his head, paced some more, then sat down hard again. Subject of an experiment? That made more sense than anything else he could come up with, and he considered it. Brainwashing? A new technique for brainwashing? Memory eradication? The image of the two men in suits came to mind, and he tried to push it out again. Theodore's conspiracy bug had infected him, he thought with a groan. Auditors, he reminded himself. Tax consultants. Trustees. Someone had expected them, admitted them to the building.

No matter how much he tried to make sense of her turnaround, he kept coming back to the thought that no normal person could have forgotten spending two hours with someone else only a few days later. Not unless that person had been brainwashed or drugged, or was nuts. And she definitely was not crazy.

It was very late when he finally went to bed, but he had a plan of action for the coming day or two. He knew how to dig, and dig he would. He intended to sift through whatever dirt was at hand and find the real Rebecca.

Every morning Edith let herself in at Rebecca's apartment at seven and started coffee. Sometimes Rebecca was already up, sometimes not. Every day Edith told her the revised story, knowing it would have to be revised again, then again, but there was no help for that. She prepared breakfast and, as they ate it, she explained to Rebecca her role in the lab, how she was supposed to be catching up on her work, write one last paper, and then start the graduate program in the fall. Rebecca accepted the story day after day.

The unexpected part was that Edith had become very fond of the girl, had come to agree that Rebecca could not be placed in an institution of any sort. Who would explain her situation to her day by day? Who would take her to a movie now and then, or out for dinner? Who would take her shopping? Treat her like a daughter? She bit her lip at that and rejected the idea.

Although she recognized her own conflicts concerning Rebecca, she felt helpless to control them. The research was going so well that it was extraordinary. It would take years to analyze the data she was accumulating and for the first time, it would all be congruent, coherent. And Rebecca didn't get bored. That was the main advantage. She didn't remember the images, the scents or sounds from one day to the next, and reacted each time as if it were the first time. Layer by layer Edith would be able to track the firing neurons, the many branches, connections, interactions. It filled her with a sense of awe. And a sense of dread. She wanted Rebecca to be well, and she wanted to continue using her until the work was complete. Cal had said she might find the trigger, but would she be able to pull it if she knew it was within her reach? She didn't know, and rejected that question too when it occurred.

After breakfast, when they entered the lab that morning, Edith introduced everyone. "Rebecca, this is Angela, one of my graduate assistants. And this is Rob, another one. We'll all be working together."

As always it was treated as a first meeting and they all made the proper responses. Early on, when she had caught Rob eyeing Rebecca with a speculative look, she had told him sharply to back off and stay backed off. He had done so, but she kept a watch on him when Rebecca was in the lab.

"What we'll do," Edith told Rebecca that morning, "is have you sit here and wear this helmet. No electricity or anything like that. It's connected to a terminal to record your responses that are fed into the computer as you watch images on the screen, or hear sounds, or even smell things. One hour and you're done for the session. Okay with that?" She showed her the helmet made of microfiber, an electrical insulating layer, and a fine wire mesh lining. It was lightweight and fit snugly, like a cloche. "To make sure there's good contact, I'll spray your hair with this wetting agent, mostly water. It washes right off, or even brushes off when you're done."

Rebecca looked at the helmet, then nodded. "Okay. Do I say anything, or do anything?"

"Nope. Just make yourself comfortable and watch the screen."

And that was it. Images of familiar objects; brief action scenes of planes, or boats; animals; more violent scenes of fighting; car wrecks; a baby crying; a scene blatantly pornographic; a tiger snarling, as if prepared to attack. . . . Interspersed with the images were the sounds: squealing tires; a woman's laughter; crashing noises; music . . .

Then it was over. It would be repeated day after day, the same tape, the same images, the same smells, and they all would be new to Rebecca, her reaction spontaneous without a trace of boredom or anticipation corrupting the data. .

Late in the afternoon they would have a second session with a different tape. Two hours of data day by day by day, six days a week. Edith would have made it seven days a week, but she knew Rob would balk, and she needed him too much to risk a rebellion. He was one of the best grads she had ever had. They would end up with years of work ahead, revolutionary work, and he would be indispensable. They would finally have a three dimensional neural map of a functioning human brain.

It was Friday of Keith's fourth week at home. No suits. No Rebecca. He jotted the absence of suits in Theodore's notebook, then he called Dr. Dreisser's number at the psychology department. He got voice mail, and left a curt message: "Dr. Dreisser, my name is Keith Adams and I have to see you about Rebecca Hardesty." He left his number and prepared to wait for her return call. The times he had seen Rebecca through the telescope, before actually meeting her, had usually been at or shortly after eleven. Whatever they were doing to her was over by then and she was free, apparently. He was prepared to wait no longer than twelve, when he would call again, and make clear that he knew illicit research was being conducted, and he would expose it unless Dreisser talked with him.

Edith sat at her desk tapping her fingers on it, regarding the telephone with resignation. It was bound to happen, she thought. She had known

that someone from Rebecca's past would show up eventually. During their long talks Rebecca had said there had been no real relationships in the past, just a few brief romances, nothing serious. That had been a tremendous relief. How had this Adams person traced Rebecca to Edith? That was the question. There was no point in asking Rebecca if she had run into him while out walking. But if she had, what had she told him? An old friend would know her story was false, of course.

She shook her head and gave up speculating, then called the number Adams had left.

Keith's hand was sweating when he snatched up his telephone. "Keith Adams," he snapped.

"Mr. Adams, I'm Edith Dreisser. You wish to consult with me?"

"No, Dr. Dreisser. I want to know just what the hell you're doing to Rebecca Hardesty. Why are you messing with her mind? Feeding her a pack of lies? That's what I want to talk about."

"I see," she said coolly. "What exactly is your relationship with Ms. Hardesty? Why do you think I would talk to you about her?"

"Because if you don't, I intend to send an email I already composed to the president of the university, with copies to the provost, two reporters, and several bloggers, accusing you of conducting unethical research, possibly brainwashing a subject, or otherwise tampering with her memory."

"Mr. Adams, just answer one question. How long have you known her?"

"What difference. . . ? I met her a week ago, but I've looked into the things she told me, and it's nothing but a tissue of lies."

"Come on around, Mr. Adams. When you arrive call me and I'll open the door for you. You're right. We must talk."

He was surprised by her when she admitted him. He knew she was fifty-one, but she looked younger, with a compact body, dressed in blue jeans and a T-shirt with colorful hummingbirds printed on it. Her hair was dark blond, long, held back with a rubber band. She nodded to him and motioned for him to come in.

"We'll go to my office," she said, turned and led the way through the deserted corridor flanked with closed doors. It was very quiet in the building.

She was as surprised by him as he evidently was by her. Younger than she had expected, possibly even a student, tall and lanky, with wind-blown dark hair, a deep tan, and startlingly blue eyes. Also, he was carrying a laptop and he had a grim expression.

In her office, cluttered almost past usefulness, she motioned toward a chair, and took her own chair behind her desk. It was covered with print-outs, stacks of folders, notebooks . . .

"Mr. Adams, I assume that you and Rebecca talked out on the campus—"

He cut her off. "Look, let's not spar," he said. "She thinks her mother's alive and well in Silverton, and that her brother's in Atlanta at work. And they're both dead. That's the starting place."

Edith shook her head. "Not really, Mr. Adams. She's suffering from a rare form of amnesia. That's the starting place."

"Did you induce it?" he demanded, leaning forward, both hands clenched. "Did you tell her there was a gas explosion? That her quad's being renovated? That she'll move back there in a day or two?"

"I really don't see that any of this is any business of yours," Edith said deliberately, coolly. "You're no more than a casual acquaintance. I'm a psychiatrist and she's my patient."

"I'm making it my business," he said. "I met her, talked to her, and that's reason enough."

"I see," Edith said, studying him. After a moment, she nodded. "I'll tell you about her," she said. She had no doubt that he had the letter on his computer, that a click of a button would send it on its way, and he knew to whom to send it to ensure questions, an investigation, likely a halt to her work with Rebecca, even if only a temporary halt. His boyish looks were deceptive, she decided, and she told him the story Cal had told her months earlier.

Keith felt sandbagged. She lived one day at a time. Period. One day at a time. No yesterday, just today.

Edith, watching him, could see belief erase all traces of hostility. He knew it was true. They must have met more than once, and Rebecca had forgotten him. He knew it was true.

"Can you cure her?" he asked after a prolonged silence. His voice had become husky.

"I don't know. There has never been a cure. Spontaneous recovery is what usually happens, if there is any recovery. Often the condition is permanent. Her case is unique. There is nothing in the literature that describes it, and I sent a case history to colleagues to find out if any of them knew of another incident like this. No one else has ever seen amnesia manifest in this way."

Keith stood up and gazed about the office helplessly, sat down again. "Have you tried telling her about the real accident again?"

"Twice," Edith said. "Exactly the same outcome as before."

"Jesus," he said. "Oh, Jesus." He looked ready to weep.

"Mr. Adams, Keith, I'm trying to find a cure, a neural pathway to whatever it is blocking her memory. A trigger, you might say. Meanwhile, for your own sake, put her out of mind. Live your own life."

The light had gone out of his eyes, she thought with pity, when he turned his gaze to her. "Tell me about your meeting," she said. "Perhaps it will give me a clue."

He told her about both times, and she nodded. "It was the shared interest in fossils, her paleontology textbook. I think the second encounter is far more likely to be her usual response to a stranger's intrusion into her space."

"She doesn't have a life," he said dully. "Start each day with a fairy tale, spend time in your lab, walk a little, read the same text day after day, go to bed, sleep, do it all again the next day and the next."

"Keith, in her mind she just spent a weekend with her family, and before that in her classes, with friends. A day off, that's all this is for her. She isn't lonely. Every day is new for her."

"What are you doing to treat her?" he asked then. "You're not drugging her, are you? What is the treatment?"

Edith sighed, but there seemed little point now in keeping anything from him. She told him about mapping the neural pathways. "It's like

peeling off one layer after another to see where the connections lead. Someone suggested like the layers of an onion, but that's too gross, too big. Like the thinnest possible tissue paper. The computer program will ignore each layer after it is recorded, and go on to the next. The secret may well be there, Keith, someplace where the connection fails to fire."

"You can't get those reactions without magnetic imaging or something like that," he said. "Are you using X-rays on her every day? CT scans? I thought we already had pretty good models of the brain."

"Not really. Think of a globe where we know where the mountains are, the continents, the major rivers. I'm looking for the lesser rivers, the tributaries, for the myriad connections that exist. Why does a particular scent invoke a strong childhood memory? What interactions result in that? How many other interactions are ignored, are dead ends? You're right, though, in a sense. The brain electricity is too faint for any non-invasive techniques we used in the past to get beyond the major systems—the visual cortex, olfactory, cognitive, and so on. But fine copper wire coated with nanocopper is virtually without resistance. It can pick up the current far below those. That's what I'm using. With our methods in the past we found the continents, some mountain ranges, and now I'm finding finer details. In Rebecca's case, I hope to find the dam blocking the flow. And then find a way to remove it."

He rubbed his eyes, then said, "When she regains her memory, will she remember this, the time it was screwed up?"

"I don't know," Edith said. "I just don't know what to expect."

"I want to keep seeing her," he said after a moment, speaking again in the firm, not-to-be-denied voice he had used on the phone, when he first made his demands. "She should have something to remember more than a daily grind. I want to keep seeing her. Take her to dinner, to a movie, dancing, to concerts. I won't hurt her," he said more softly. "God knows, I won't hurt her."

Just as softly, Edith said, "Keith, she could break your heart."

He might not have heard. "It will be up to her, won't it? She isn't a prisoner."

"It's up to her," Edith agreed. "But she has to be back in her apartment by nine-thirty." He looked ready to erupt, and she said gently, "Keith, it's not my curfew. By nine-thirty she is exhausted. By ten she's asleep."

He nodded. "Curfew. Okay."

Then he lifted his laptop and opened it, turned the screen to let her see the letter he had written, and he deleted it. She had not doubted for a second that the letter existed, was ready to send. "Thank you," she said.

A short time later she led him to the lab. "I'll introduce you to my assistants, and Rebecca," she said.

Inside the lab there were several desks and computers, file cabinets, stacks of papers. . . . In the corner at a desk Rebecca was reading her paleontology text. Both Angela and Rob were at computers, concentrating on scrolling data that appeared to be composed of numbers and symbols. Two printers were turning out hard copies of something.

"Time out for a second," Edith said just inside the doorway. "I want you to meet an old friend, Keith Adams."

That surprised him, but he nodded as she introduced her assistants and then Rebecca. She looked up from her book with an interested expression, and not a hint of recognition. Keith took a step or two closer to her, peering at the open page of her book.

"Fossils? Paleontology? We had to read a couple of chapters in that same book. To teach us the difference between fossils and worked stones, I guess."

"If a bone is completely mineralized, why isn't it a stone?" she said, smiling slightly.

"It has its own special category," he said. "One is shaped by hand, and the other sits and waits for nature to shape it. Fossils are sedentary rocks."

Rebecca laughed.

"You know where a person could get a sandwich or something?"

"Sure. The student union has a grill."

"Join me for lunch? I'll tell you the difference between fossils and true rocks, let you surprise the hell out of your instructor."

She glanced at Edith.

"Why don't you show him where it is," Edith said. "Just be back by three."

Rebecca hesitated momentarily, then closed the book. "Okay," she said.

"We can argue the point about when is a stone not a stone."

Across the room Angela was smiling broadly, but Rob looked disturbed, withdrawn. Disturbed, Edith thought again. Why? As far as she had been able to tell, he had backed off completely, and had not crossed the line, but rather treated Rebecca like a sister. Or a highly valued experimental subject.

Keith and Rebecca walked out together talking, and before the outer door closed, Edith heard her laughter again.

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, Keith thought, and fully understood the meaning, although when he read it as an arrogant teenaged boy he had scoffed and said, "Make up your mind." He was euphoric when he was with her, and it was hellish at night, mornings before she appeared, and when she reentered the psych building leaving him outside. He read every article he could find concerning amnesia, and did not come across a single clue to undo what an evil fate had done to her. No one knew why it happened, why it stopped happening, when it did stop. It could last for seconds, hours, months, years, forever. She might remember the interlude or she might not. It was too variable to predict.

They talked, laughed, joked, argued a little. He suspected that Dreisser was sending her out every day, possibly even agreeing with him that Rebecca needed more than the daily grind, but he didn't really care why, he simply felt grateful.

Then, on duty at the telescope, he saw the suits again. He watched them march to the door, wait a moment until someone opened it, and enter. It was ten after nine. He made a note, and only then realized that he was in week seven. Faye and Theodore would return in another week, and he had not come up with a job, or any plan for the future. The suits emerged ten minutes later. He made a note.

Every day he found a new way to introduce himself to Rebecca, using her textbook as a doorway most often. If she didn't have it with her, he simply asked if she knew where a guy could grab a sandwich, or he came



up with something else. As long as he didn't overreach, she was open and friendly, and as they began to walk together and talk, her reserve gradually melted away. He knew he couldn't touch her, or hint that he knew anything about her, or a wall would fall into place with him on the outside. The best of times and the worst of times.

It was winding down, Edith knew. They were nearing the limits of accessible data. Then what? she was asking herself more and more frequently. There was no answer. Of course, the work would be all-consuming when they started the analysis, but that was aside from her question of then what.

Rebecca was starting to express concern that she still had a paper to write and school would begin in a few weeks. She made notes feverishly, and every morning Edith stole the notes and put them in her own purse. Rebecca would have to be told some version of the truth, she decided, not that her mother and brother were dead, but that she had this rare form of amnesia. . . . Sitting at her desk, tapping her fingers on it, she tried to imagine what it would mean to hear that whatever she did today would be forgotten tomorrow. That her life had basically come to a halt months before. Like a mayfly, she thought. There was no life before or after today. Life without purpose, without goals, hopes. Mere existence for now, this brief period.

There was a knock on her door, and she welcomed the interruption of her dismal thoughts. "Come on in," she called.

Rob entered, looking as wretched as she was feeling. "Can I talk to you?" he asked hesitantly.

"You know you can," she said. "Have a seat."

Rob Crawford was twenty-eight, a little too thin, and very intense. Sometimes, talking to her alone, he became almost tongue-tied, but the shyness, awkwardness, whatever it was vanished completely in the lab or discussing the work. He was very talented, destined to become an excellent researcher in the field of neuroscience, one of her prize students, she often thought, as she did that day waiting for him to begin.

"Dr. Dreisser, I've done something terrible," he said finally. He looked agonized.

"Relax, Rob," she said. "Take a deep breath and tell me about it."

He swallowed hard and nodded. Haltingly, with awkward pauses, sometimes mumbling, avoiding her gaze, he started. "A couple of months ago a guy came here. He called me first and I let him in. He was a . . . a recruiter for the army. They're looking for people. You know, psychologists, psychiatrists, neuroscience majors . . . People like that."

He shifted uncomfortably. "I said not interested. He came back with another guy, a major, and they said it was a case of national security and swore me to secrecy. If I told anyone I could be prosecuted. The major knew all about your work, Dr. Dreisser. He said he read your article. He said . . . he said I had to cooperate with them, it's the law. He had Rebecca's hospital records and everything."

Edith had grown more and more tense as he talked. She got up and went to a side table where there was a carafe and mugs. She poured them both coffee, and put a mug in front of Rob. He looked at her gratefully.

"Cooperate in what way, Rob?" she said then, sitting again at her desk.

"Report on how the work is coming. If Rebecca is recovering her memory.

Things like that." He took a sip of coffee, and kept his gaze on the mug. "They call me every week for a report," he mumbled. "I'm not supposed to tell you. Or anyone else."

"What else, Rob?" Edith asked when he remained silent too long.

He still didn't look at her. "He, the major, began asking a couple of weeks ago how close to finishing we are. He, I think he knows about diminishing returns, and stuff like that. He came today," he said more miserably than before. "He wants, wanted, a date or something. Will we be done with this phase next week, this week. You know, just when we'll move on. And he wanted to go into the lab." He cleared his throat, sipped coffee, as if his mouth was too dry to continue. "I wouldn't let him go in, but he looked in at the door. I should have told you right away, but he said . . . I mean, national security, classified, prosecution. I mean, he already seemed to know all about it, all about Rebecca. I should have told you," he mumbled. "I'm sorry, Dr. Dreisser. I'm sorry."

"Rob, he played the trump card. National security. It's okay. I'm glad you told me now. We'll go on from here."

"I'll resign, quit, go away if you want me to," he said, finally looking up.

"Don't be ridiculous. Of course you won't quit. What you'll do is go back to work and let me think about this." She stood up and walked around her desk, took the mug from his hands, and opened the office door. "Off you go, back to work."

He jumped up and hurried to the doorway, where he paused and, mumbling again, said, "Thanks. I mean . . . thanks." He blushed furiously when she smiled at him, and then rushed out.

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" she muttered under her breath, closing the door after him. That last glance at her had expressed nothing short of adoration.

All right, she thought then, resuming her seat at the desk. They knew about the work. Everyone in the field who read the journal knew what she was attempting, with only enough success in the early days to demonstrate that the approach was at least feasible. But the major also knew about Rebecca, and that changed the feasibility from a doubtful possible to probable. One subject, forever naïve, one brain to study, and months now put into the effort signified that she was getting results.

He knew about diminishing returns, probably a scientist himself, as well as a major. Army intelligence? CIA? An agency she had never heard of? What would they do with her work if they had it? That major seemed to grasp research methods; he must know that analysis could take many months, years even. They would classify it, she thought then. They had people who would understand the significance, who would find a way to use it for their own purposes. She tried to banish that thought, that fear, but it persisted. It might never be published if they seized it.

A deep chill swept her then as she thought: even if they weren't interested in the work itself, they could seize the subject, that forever naïve subject who forgot all her yesterdays.

Her thoughts were swirling chaotically, and she forced herself to stop, to take it one step at a time. Hospital records. They must have subpoenaed the hospital for them. They had known what they were after. Data mining, searching for amnesia? Possibly, she decided. And she was listed

as Rebecca's doctor. A five-minute search would have uncovered her recent paper regarding a new approach to mapping of the brain.

They could take Rebecca, she knew without doubt. Disappear her. She might never surface again. The perfect, forever naïve subject who would never reveal the nature of whatever experimentation she had undergone.

She would talk to the attorney who was handling Rebecca's affairs, she decided a few minutes later. Set up a guardianship, make her a ward of the state or something, get a court order forbidding access to her. He would know what legal steps could be taken. She had little or no faith in the law stopping them, not if recent precedents were followed. They could seize whomever they pleased, apparently, but that was the first step. At least try.

She called him and when he said he would be happy to see her, of course, she said, "Now? I could come right over to your office."

Obviously surprised, he said now would be fine.

Fred DeLancey was his name, a big, athletic man, a mountain climber, with pictures of mountains he had climbed all over his office. He pursed his lips as he listened, then he said, "It's a bit tricky, isn't it? No one's made an overt motion toward her at this time."

"I doubt there will be preliminary moves on their part, if they follow the same pattern I've read about. They'll just appear, demand her, and leave, taking her with them."

He nodded absently. "I'll need a day or two to assess the situation, decide on a course we can adopt. It would be good if you could squirrel her away for a few days. Keep her out of sight, out of reach. You think they'll move this weekend?"

"I think so. That major looked over the lab this morning, probably to see how much equipment they'll haul away. They know we're winding down, that this phase is nearing the end. The worst case scenario is for them to arrive with a moving van on Saturday." It was Thursday.

"Dr. Dreisser, why do you think they'd seize your research as well as Ms. Hardesty?"

"They will not want it published. Anyone trained in the field will realize that I used one subject throughout even if that is not stated or if it is redacted. And with some reflection, they will know that she was naïve, not bored, throughout. The next step will be to surmise that the government now has that same subject, and I think with the secrecy mania being exhibited by the current government that is something they would not want known." When he continued to look puzzled, she said, "A trained researcher will know instantly the value of a naïve subject who can be subjected to many variations of any given procedure until the most efficacious one is determined."

When she left his office it was with a despairing certainty that he would come up empty-handed. A preemptive court order based on nothing but her fear of what might happen, that's what they wanted from a judge. And she had not been able to guess how much of her fear DeLancey believed was justified. He said he would give her a call on Monday.

That night Edith stalked about her small house furiously, making plan after plan, discarding them. She imagined dialogues—he would say so

and so and she would respond such and such, then he would threaten, and. . . . Angrily she discarded that kind of speculation, also. In every case the end was the same with imagined scenes of men carrying out computers, boxes of printouts, stashing them inside a black van. With a man with a buzz cut taking Rebecca out to another black car, something long and shiny, driving away with her. Rebecca would look back to her in bewilderment in that scene.

It was very late when she fell into bed, into a dream of myriad lights flashing, like a condensed Milky Way put in motion. Dots of light raced from one point to another, flashing as molecules were exchanged, racing on, gathering speed, slowing down, fading out or growing stronger. She heard her own voice lecturing: "There are no non-stop flights in the space of a human brain. There is no one-way track." She came wide awake with the sound.

"No!" she said. "Goddamn it, no!" It was five in the morning. By the time she got up, made coffee and showered, she knew what she was going to do.

After the morning session that day she did not suggest to Rebecca that she should take a walk to relax. Instead, as soon as Rebecca was seated at the corner desk with her open book, Edith left the building. Keith appeared almost instantly. He never waited for Rebecca in any way that might appear obvious to her, but he watched the building.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "Is something wrong with her?"

"No. She'll be out in a few minutes. Just listen and please don't ask questions. I can't answer any questions at this time. This afternoon she'll be delayed a little, but she'll come out at about four-thirty. I'll be with her. I want you to take her somewhere. Do you have a car?"

He nodded. Three available cars, he thought. "Then what?"

"I want her out of sight for a couple of days, until Monday afternoon. That's all."

"Why?" He couldn't help it. The question came of its own accord.

"No questions for now. Is there someplace where you can spend a day or two? Even a motel, if that's all there is."

"I know someplace private," he said. "Is she willing?"

"I won't tell her until after the next session. I'll go to her apartment with her and tell her, let her pack a few things, and we'll meet you out here." She looked at him searchingly, then said, "You realize that she'll need a plausible explanation in the morning. That she becomes exhausted early and has to go to sleep around ten."

"I'll take care of her," he said. "I know."

"I think you do," Edith said. "One more thing. I don't want anyone to know about this. No one. Do you know where the visitors' parking lot is?" At his nod, she said, "Leave your car over there. I don't want to know what you're driving or where you'll take her. You have my cell phone number if you need me, and I have yours. I'll call you on Monday."

He nodded grimly, his mind summoning up an image of the suits, Theodore's conviction that something was going on.

"Good. I'll see you later," Edith said. She turned and walked back to the building.

Edith was experiencing an icy calm, but Keith was almost manic at the thought of two or three days with Rebecca. "The only way anyone will get to

her is over my blood-soaked body," he said under his breath. He retreated to his viewpoint to wait for another chance meeting with a stranger.

As soon as the afternoon session ended that day, Edith said, "Okay, kiddies. Wrap it up. Announcement time." Angela and Rob swivelled around at attention, and Rebecca stopped walking. She had been on the way to the washroom to towel off her hair.

"Something's come up," Edith said. "I can't be here most of tomorrow, so I'm declaring a holiday. A long weekend, two whole days! Any objections?"

Angela clapped, but Rob looked miserable. She was very afraid that he had begun biting his fingernails, but she couldn't deal with that at the moment. She glanced at Rebecca. "I'll walk over to your apartment with you." To the others she said, "I'll see you on Monday. Have fun."

After she stopped by her office to pick up a large briefcase, she and Rebecca left the building by a rear door. A short distance away was a fenced area with a locked gate, and behind the fence was a courtyard and eight or ten small apartments, used by short-time visitors, lecturers, seminar leaders, others who came, did a stint for a week or longer, then left. There were half a dozen grills in the courtyard, picnic tables, shade trees, a comfortable, quiet and private retreat from a noisy campus most of the year. Now, in late summer, only three of the apartments were being used.

Inside Rebecca's unit, Edith said, "I want to try something new with you. I've brought aboard another member of our team, a young man named Keith Adams, and he'll assist me in this."

Rebecca laughed. "I already met him," she exclaimed. "I think he's been looking over the campus. He seems awfully nice."

"He is nice," Edith said. "I thought the two of you would get along. I want to try a change of scene with you for a couple of days, see if it jogs your memory. I believe that such a change can be quite beneficial."

"Go somewhere with Keith?" Rebecca said doubtfully.

"Yes. He's trustworthy and he'll take good care of you. He'll be working for me, and he knows the rules. You have absolutely nothing to be concerned about with him."

"Where will we go?"

Edith shook her head. "That's part of the experiment, not to know too soon. Just somewhere different." She lifted the empty briefcase. "Go pack a few things, a nightshirt or gown, robe, slippers, things like that. No more than you can fit into the case."

"More and more mysterious," Rebecca said. "Okay. You're the doctor."

Edith closed her eyes when Rebecca left to pack. The doctor, she thought bitterly. For all the good she was doing, she might as well be a strip dancer. Do no harm, she thought even more bitterly. Right. She was missing something, she knew, maybe a small detail that could have helped, maybe something big and significant. Something kept eluding her. Or her preoccupation with her research was blinding her to that something.

After Rebecca reentered the psych building that day, Keith was galvanized into frantic activity. He raced back to the condo and threw clothes into his backpack, added extra sweatshirts, piled rain gear on a chair to be tossed into the back seat. He moved his mother's car from the covered

parking space and put his Honda there. Hers was a Prius. She was doing her part, she had said when she bought it. He made coffee and filled a Thermos and put the cabin key in his pocket. He had to go shopping, ice for a small cooler, munchies, cheese, cream, fruit, juice. She didn't drink carbonated drinks or beer. She had said ruefully that they burned her tongue.

At a quarter after four he pulled into the parking lot, a ten minute walk from the psych building. That day he made it in five minutes, then had to wait an agonizing twenty minutes for them to appear.

She had to trust him, Edith thought as they left the apartment and walked around the building to the front entrance. She was placing this girl in his hands for the coming days and she had to trust him. It wasn't the days that worried her, she thought then, but the long nights. Rebecca had to be in bed by ten, and he would no doubt be up for hours after that. She spotted him at the end of the walk, at the edge of the access street that wound in and out around the buildings. The long nights, she thought again. And Rebecca had to be asleep by ten.

She almost stopped walking with the phrase repeating in her mind. She had to be asleep. My God! she thought then. That could be it. That compulsion, that need could be part of the amnesia syndrome! Not simple fatigue, not a lifelong habit, part of the syndrome.

When they drew near Keith, she said to Rebecca, "Wait here a second, will you? Last minute instructions to your escort."

She went on ahead when Rebecca stopped. "Her things are in here," she told Keith, handing him the briefcase. "One thing I want you to try. Don't let her go to sleep if you can help it. Keep her awake as many hours past ten as you can."

"No Doz pills," he said promptly. "Lots of coffee."

If she had thought of it earlier, she could have provided something, but it was too late. No Doz should work. She motioned for Rebecca to join them. "Your escort is ready and waiting. And since you two have already met, no introductions are needed, I think. I'll see you in a couple of days. Good luck!"

"You never even mentioned that you were working for Dr. Dreisser," Rebecca said accusingly.

"What would your reaction have been if I'd said I intended to take you away for a day or two?"

"You would have seen a new speed record set."

They were talking animatedly as they walked away, two young people, students to all appearances. He carried a briefcase, nothing remarkable, nothing memorable if anyone even noticed them. Edith returned to the psych building.

"The plan," Keith said on the way to the car, "is first to go to a supermarket. I want to buy some foam cups for later. Hot coffee. And then Starbucks to fill a Thermos. I put coffee in it, but Mother's coffee is pretty bad. I'll dump it and fill it with decent coffee. Okay?"

"Do you have sugar? And something for breakfast? I hate not having something to eat in the morning until you can get out and find an open restaurant."



He groaned. "No sugar, no breakfast. Your department while I find cups." That would work out great, he thought. Give him a chance to find No Doz while she was busy. He continued with the plan. "After the house-keeping stuff, a restaurant for dinner before we hit the road. Traffic's going to be stop and start for the next couple of hours. Friday night, get out of town night. You know any good restaurants nearby?"

"A couple," she said. "Italian, Mexican, Chinese, Japanese, Moroccan, French, Brazilian . . ."

As soon as Angela and Rob left, Edith checked the lab, made sure everything was turned off, locked up, and went home. Eat something, she told herself, nap. That was laughable. She had never been able to nap, and she knew she would not be able to that evening. There was too much on her mind, too much to do. She began to assemble the things she knew she would need. A stack of CDs, a plastic trash bag, big envelope, a padded one to go inside it. . . . She remembered that she should eat something and scrambled eggs and made toast, then had little appetite for it.

They chose Italian, and were ready to start driving at a quarter after seven. By nine-thirty they would be at the coast and stop for a short walk, have coffee. If she yawned after that, he would stop and they would have more coffee, and each time hers would be spiked.

"It was silly not to tell me where we're going," Rebecca said as soon as he turned onto Highway 26. "Now the question is where on the coast?"

"Newport. My folks have a cabin there."

She sighed. "That's where we always headed when we were kids. Nye Beach, Agate Beach, down past Florence to the dunes to swim in the lakes there. Childhood is wasted on the young. That's what I think. As soon as you get old enough to really appreciate it, you're too busy to just leave everything and take off. I haven't been to the coast since last fall."

At eight Edith returned to the psych building. Any colleagues who had been around during the day should be gone by then, and she could not put it off until later because after ten the courtyard by the apartments would be off limits to anyone except the residents. She had no fear of being seen by the cleaning people or a watchman. She often worked into the night.

She entered the lab and locked the door, then turned on all the computers. Three were dedicated to the research project, the fourth was a general-use machine. She had warned Angela and Rob in the beginning that if she caught anyone surfing the Internet, using email or playing games on a dedicated computer, she would turn that person inside out. Suddenly she recalled something her grandfather had said when she was very small, no doubt doing something forbidden. "You do that again and I'll jerk a knot in your tail," he had rumbled. She smiled at the memory that had been locked away for more than forty years.

She examined the files then, starting with Rob's computer that held all the data from the first trial, labeled Map 1, up to and including Rebecca's, number 5. Nothing else was on the computer, and she started copying the whole disk to CDs. She repeated this with Angela's machine, started

copying, and went on to the third one that held all the images and sounds she had assembled to put together the final tapes she used. That one would take longer, she suspected, and started the process. The general-use machine held her interest for a few minutes, then she turned it off again. Nothing there concerned the research.

Her next step was to gather all the hard copies, reams of printouts, and put them in the trash bag. Leaving the computers copying data, she took the bag to her office and added the printouts on her desk. She scanned pages of her hand-written notes in two notebooks and, using her own computer, copied the scanned material onto disk, then added the notebooks to the trash bag.

As soon as she was certain she had all the paper copies, she carried the trash bag through the building, out the back door, on to the courtyard where she used all six grills to distribute them, and finally set them on fire. She felt only an icy calm as she watched paper catch fire, curl, and burn.

"What will Dr. Hardesty do when she finally gets grant money?" Keith asked, driving. They were near enough to the ocean now that he could smell it. It was almost coffee time.

"Dr. Hardesty," she said. "Sounds good, doesn't it. Dr. Hardesty will find Lucy's ancestors, and then track her descendants until she finds the first one to leave Africa and head for Europe." She paused, then added, "Admittedly it might take awhile. Meanwhile, what will Dr. Adams do with his grant money?"

"Find Atlantis," he said, his hands tightening on the steering wheel. Fairy tale stuff, he thought. Might as well say he would find a lost civilization on Mars.

"Oh dear," she said. "I was hoping you'd be around to dig holes for me to poke into looking for bones. But you'll be deep in the ocean somewhere."

"Okay, I'll dig holes."

"And I'll come along and tip my hat and say, 'Dr. Adams, I presume.'"

Neither one was laughing any longer. In a lower voice then she said, "Do you think you'll hang around when classes start next month?"

"I'll be around," he said.

It took longer to burn paper than she had anticipated. Accidental fires seemed to race along, but a deliberate fire was stubborn; papers burned around the edges, and those inside resisted the flames. She relighted one grill and inspected the others to find more unburned papers. She should have brought something to stir them with, she realized. She looked under the trees until she found a stick and that made it go faster. She had thought at first that she would shred them, but the shredder was old and slow and it didn't cross cut, just spat out strips of paper. She had envisioned long tables with people patiently putting together strips of paper, and decided to go with fire.

In Cannon Beach they walked down a street or two. There were a lot of people out and about; shops were open, teenagers were singing a school song, marching four abreast.

"Keith," she said in a faint voice, "can we go back to the car? I'm really tired. Doesn't seem fair, does it? You do all the driving, and I'm the one who's tired."

"No problem. We'll get out of this and I'll fix you Dr. Adams' rejuvenating, secret formula elixir, guaranteed to make you feel like a kid or your money back."

He drove south a short distance, pulled over at a viewpoint turn out, and poured the coffee. He made hers very sweet, with a lot of cream, and he stirred a No Doz tablet into it.

"Wow!" she said after a sip. "That's really good! Like a cappuccino. Patent that formula, Dr. Adams."

"Aim to please, ma'am," he said. "Just aim to please."

The papers were all ashes, the ashes stirred to dead black heaps, and Edith was back inside. The computers had all stopped working with Disk Full messages on the monitor screens. She put in new disks, then went to her office to make a pot of coffee. She labeled the filled disks, put them in sleeves and the sleeves in the padded envelope.

She began to examine her own computer. Everything she wanted to keep private she moved to a new file she named Keep Out and, finished with that, she copied Keep Out to disk and put it with the others.

When all the disks were complete, she had seven in the envelope, and finally she sat down at Rob's computer and keyed in new instructions, starting with the first file, Map number 1. She repeated this with the other computers, including her own file Keep Out, then leaned back in her chair and only then realized that tears were on her cheeks, her eyes were burning. Angrily she wiped them with the back of her hand.

They ate chips and drank juice and Rebecca babbled as Keith drove south on the black, winding mountain road to Newport. When her babble slowed down and she yawned, he stopped and they had coffee, and afterward she babbled again.

Finally they arrived at the cabin on a high point overlooking the ocean, invisible, but audible in the rhythm of the surf. It was ten minutes after twelve, and she was still wide awake, filled with nervous energy.

They carried everything inside. "I'll make a fire," he said. "It's cold in here." He started to crumple paper. "Did you ever pull an all-nighter?"

"Are you kidding? We used to get a lot of horror movies and watch them all night, falling asleep on the floor, in chairs, wherever we happened to be. It was different in school. You know, studying for the midterm, or the finals, drinking coffee and then drinking more coffee until dawn."

"Let's do it tonight," he said. "Play Rummy or Scrabble by the fire."

"You're on. Bet you go to sleep before I do."

"How much? A buck?"

"Make it interesting. Ten."

"You're covered. First the fire."

Edith checked the computers one last time, then turned them all off, turned off the lights in the lab, and locked the door. In her office she drew

out a sheet of paper from a drawer and wrote a brief note: *Dear Cal, please keep the enclosed envelope in a safe place for me. I'll explain next time I see you. It's confidential, of course.*

Done, she thought then, leaning back in her chair with her eyes closed, the envelope addressed to Cal at his home, not the hospital. It was three in the morning. Time to go home and try to get a few hours of sleep. She planned to be back in her office by eight, ready for an uninvited major to drop in.

They played Rummy and chess, and they played Scrabble. For long intervals they simply talked, about books, movies, music. She talked about her dead father, whom she had adored, and he talked about his father, who couldn't stay in any one place more than a year or two, and rode a Harley Davidson. She exulted when she won a game, groaned when she lost, and hotly defended indefensible words playing Scrabble. "Xerox has too become generic!" she argued.

Finally she crashed. "I'm going blind," she said. "Back in a minute." She walked out of the room, staggering, holding onto furniture on her way, and she didn't return. He found her minutes later stretched out on the bed sound asleep. He took off her shoes and put a blanket over her, then stood gazing at her. He realized he was praying, please remember. When you wake up, please remember.

Staggering nearly as much as she had done, he left, walked through the living room to a door to a small balcony. Standing on it in a slight drizzle, with pale fog hiding the ocean, he kept hearing the prayer over and over in his mind: Please remember. The deep blackness of night had yielded to predawn, visible fog, he noticed finally. They had stayed up all night.

He passed up the second bedroom and stretched out on the couch when he returned to the living room. He had to be near enough to hear her when she woke up, be ready to tell her a story, to reassure her that everything was all right, she was all right. His mind was blank. *Please remember.*

The call from the major came at eight thirty. He introduced himself, then said, "I'm on official government business, Dr. Dreisser. Please open the door for me."

Or I'll huff and I'll puff and kick the door down, she thought, walking through the corridor. When she opened the door, looking past him, she saw the van, not black at all, but silvery blue. Several suited men were standing by it.

"Dr. Dreisser, I'm Major Thomas Tynsdale, with orders to seize various computers and records, as outlined in this National Security Letter." Sharp features, nice hair turning a bit gray, a stocky build, he looked like a middle school gym teacher. He handed her the document, motioned his men to come forward, and walked past her toward the lab. She followed without a word.

The monitors were all on, the programs halted and the screens filled with line after line of numbers. He glanced at Rob's computer, turned away, then abruptly swung around again to stare at the screen.

"Start it again," he said in a strained voice.

She did so, and the lines began to scroll. Just numbers, no symbols, no breaks.

"What the hell are you doing?" he demanded then.

"I thought it would be interesting to see if such antiquated machines could solve for  $\pi$ ," she said.

He shoved past her to the computer and sent the program to the start of the file, then to the directory, back to the scrolling lines of numbers.

"It's archived," he said in a grating voice. "You can't overwrite things and get rid of them."

"We don't archive ongoing research. A simple backup is enough. An external hard-drive backup, automatic, of course, in order to keep a running backup of all input."

He had turned livid, with a tic jerking in his cheek. "The hard copies," he snapped. "What did you do with the hard copies?"

"I burned them."

"I don't believe you. You're lying. You're a scientist. You don't destroy ground-breaking research like that."

She said nothing, stood with her arms crossed over her breasts, and she thought, *Neither do we turn it over to a secret agency to bury.*

"I want to see Ms. Hardesty," he said after a moment when Edith continued to stand in silence.

"She isn't here."

"Give me the key to her apartment."

She turned and walked back to her office, to her purse, and brought out the key, handed it to him. He made no motion to leave.

"What have you done with her? Where is she?"

"I don't know. She went to dinner with a man, Keith Adams, and she hasn't come back. I don't know where they are."

He told her to wait in her office, and she poured coffee, took it to her desk and sat down to wait. She could almost pity the major, she thought. He knew the research she had done, had been doing, and he knew that whatever agency ended up with Rebecca would not be interested in basic research such as this. Torn between the expediency of his job and his training and inclination toward science, he had made his choice and would have many regrets, she believed.

They would come back and ask questions, demand answers, probably make threats, take what they wanted and leave. She could wait them out, for now and for an indefinite time to come. When this madness ended, when sanity returned to the world, the work would surface again, be completed, if not by her, then by another, possibly by Rob.

Keith's sleep was restless, dream filled. Too much caffeine remained in his body for deep sleep. He came wide awake when he heard Rebecca cry out. He stumbled as he rushed to the bedroom. She was sitting upright, staring ahead, deathly pale. She cried out again, "Mother!" She flung her hands over her face, shaking. Fearing the hysteria Edith had talked about, he hesitated only a moment, then ran to the bed and took Rebecca in his arms. She was weeping, shaking.

"She's dead! Mother is dead! And Travis. They're dead! Oh, God, they're both dead! Keith, my mother, my brother! They're dead!"

He held her as she wept, and he wept with her. ○

# ANOTHER COUNTRY

Matthew Johnson

Matthew Johnson's story "Public Safety" (*Asimov's*, 2007) will be reprinted in the 2008 edition of *Fantasy: the Year's Best*. Matthew's new story was inspired by multicultural Canada. He tells us "there's ample funding here for classes in what are called 'heritage languages'—languages of the countries people emigrated from. This list includes modern and *ancient* Greek, which led me, a former Latin student, to wonder under what circumstances Heritage Latin might be offered."

Geoff squinted at the figures emerging from the fissure, his period recognition chart at the ready. Not that he needed it, in this case: he was able to fix the new arrivals as soon as he saw their tunics and trousers—late-Empire Romanized Goths, probably fleeing Attila's invasion of lands their own ancestors had invaded a few generations before.

"*Te salutem do, amici*," he said slowly, holding his hands up and palm-outward. The light was fading now, and the four prefugees were looking around apprehensively. The reception room, built around the fissure that had first opened right downtown fifteen years before, had been designed to minimize culture shock, with no modern technology or materials visible.

The fissures had consistency but no logic: prefugees from the Mongol invasions wound up in Seattle, Aztecs in Paris, Romans in Ottawa, and so on. The only thing that was known for sure was that they always brought people from places and times that were much worse than now, periods of tremendous chaos and danger; as a result, the people that came through were wary, and some of the first encounters had not ended well.

"What is your name?" Geoff asked in slow, careful Latin.

The prefugees—a bearded man, a woman with her blond hair in braids, and two young boys—regarded him cautiously. The man turned back to the woman, said something in a thickly Gothic-accented dialect Geoff couldn't follow. She nodded, keeping her eyes down, and gathered the two boys to her. "Odoricus Aemilianus," the man said. "Where have we come?"

"This is a safe place," Geoff went on. "It is very different from the place you left, but you are welcome."



"How did we arrive here?" the man said, keeping himself between his family and Geoff.

"Good fortune," Geoff said. It was Welcome Services' official answer, and as good a one as anyone could give. "Please—there are many things you have to know, before we can find you a new home. If you'll come with me, my comrades will get you started."

The man looked back over his shoulder, whether at his family or the vanished fissure Geoff didn't know. Finally he made a grunt of assent, jerked his head to order his wife and children forward.

Geoff released the breath he had been half-holding. Ninety percent of what the official terminology called Delayed Integrations happened in the initial encounter. Now that that was over he could do the rest on autopilot, supervising the refugees' processing and initial billeting. When the fissures had first opened, the people that had come through had been seen as a tremendous opportunity, a goldmine for historians and anthropologists; now, in the thousands, they were just more immigrants to be settled and assimilated. This family would probably integrate all right, he thought: the boys looked young enough to pick up English without too much of an accent, and despite the wife's public deference to her husband Gothic women were typically more independent than their Roman counterparts.

He was still thinking about them a few hours later, as he climbed the stairs of an apartment building in Vanier on a follow-up visit to a family he'd welcomed two years ago. More than anything else in modern society, it was the difference in relations between the sexes which refugees found the most difficult. Women and girls mostly flourished, while men and boys—deprived of the *pater familias* status even the poorest free Roman male could expect within his family—did less well. At least these new arrivals, unlike most refugees, still had their father.

Knocking at the Columellae's door, Geoff wished they'd had the same advantage. He stepped back, smiled at the fish-eye. A few moments later the door opened inwards for a few centimeters before being stopped by the security chain. "Galfridius?" a female voice said from within.

Geoff sighed. "Ave, Fulvia," he said. "How are you?"

The door closed briefly, opened again once Fulvia had unlatched the chain. She was a broad, buxom woman in her late forties, pure Roman stock from about five hundred years earlier than that afternoon's arrivals. Her black-and-white streaked hair was done up in a messy bun and she was wearing a simple blue house toga, accented with a long string of fake pearls. "Please, come in."

"Thank you." The small apartment was spotless, as always, but the smell of a thousand meals' worth of anchovies and olive oil—unrelieved by windows that didn't open and a range hood that didn't work—was overpowering. Two armless Ikea couches, in some spots worn through to the stuffing, were perpendicular to the TV, on which the lares sat in a neat pile. The set was tuned to the Latin-language community channel, a Plautus play with the sound off. Between the couches, facing the TV directly, sat an unused armchair wrapped in clear plastic. "How is work?"

"Fine," Fulvia said, brushing a stray hair out of her face. She waved

him to the chair. "Someone a maid pretending was, and stealing, so ID cards now we have to get."

Geoff settled uncomfortably into the chair. "Are you going to miss work?"

"No, I'm on my own time doing it. There's a bus I can take, the picture taken to get."

"Good." Geoff accepted a cup of coffee, sipped it carefully. Few Romans ever acquired a taste for coffee, and Fulvia was no exception; she only made it when he came over, and had no idea how much to use, so that it was always either near-water or Turkish-style sludge. "Any other problems?"

A painful look flickered across Fulvia's face before being replaced by a fixed smile. "No, no problems," she said. "A little cake would you—would you like, a little cake?"

Geoff shook his head. His friends in the community told him Fulvia was an excellent cook, well-known for her lentils with chestnuts, but it was his misfortune to always be served prefugees' idea of what moderns ate—an idea in which plastic wrap and microwaves figured strongly. The penalty, he supposed, for being the poster boy for integration. "No, thank you." He took a long sip from his coffee. "How is Attius?"

Fulvia grimaced again, showing Geoff that he had guessed right. "In school he's doing well. In Heritage Latin he has top marks in his class."

"Good. Is he still in ESL?" He really ought to know that—prefugees' language status was supposed to be kept updated in Welcome Services' records—but since most of his workload had shifted from first encounters to follow-ups like these, there were simply too many to keep track of.

"No, regular English," Fulvia said.

"Is he making friends?"

Fulvia glanced away. "Some."

"Different kinds of people, or just other Romans?"

"I don't know," she said, her voice quickening. "When they're here, they just go into his room and the counter use."

"The computer."

"Yes. And when I come in they talking stop." She sat down, perching on the edge of the couch nearest to him. "The boys outside, on the walls they write, they into fights get. Maybe in his room he's safer."

"Probably. It can be dangerous out there, for a boy his age."

"He's so sensitive, and smart," Fulvia said. "His father a quaestor was, and a poet, did I tell you that?"

Geoff shook his head, though of course she had. "Would you like me to talk to Attius? Make sure he's fitting in okay?"

She looked away, then nodded. "You're not too busy?"

"This is my job, Fulvia," he said. "And I'm happy to do it."

Fulvia held a handkerchief to her face, dabbed at her nose. "Thank you," she said. She rose, vanished into the kitchen, returned a moment later carrying two plastic-wrapped Twinkies. "Here. So you don't away hungry go."

"Do not concern yourself, Geoffrey. This boy of yours is in no trouble." Marcus Apicius was holding court at Mello's, the restaurant that was his

in all but name. On the table in front of him sat a plate crowded with fat snails; painted on the cream-yellow wall behind were the words *Hold back your quarrels, if you can. If not, go home.*

"He's Fulvia Columella's," Geoff said. "Do you know the family?"

Marcus popped a snail into his mouth with a tiny silver fork and chewed thoughtfully. "Maybe," he said.

Glancing up at the quote written on the wall, Geoff bit his tongue. "How do you know he's not in trouble, then?" he asked.

"These Columellae, they're an old family, even in my time—a good family, yes? So he's not in trouble."

"That doesn't necessarily follow, you know that," Geoff said. They had both been part of the earliest wave of arrivals, but Marcus remained every inch the old Roman. That was why Geoff was meeting with him: Marcus had always been the man Roman refugees came to when they needed help of a kind Welcome Services couldn't provide, and he stayed in touch with the community in a way Geoff couldn't hope to.

"But it does, Geoffrey," Marcus said. "Tell me, what do you mean by 'trouble'? Is it running around in a gang, playing tough?"

"I don't know. Probably, yes."

"Then no, he's not in trouble." He speared another snail, dropped it in his mouth and closed his eyes. "Geoffrey, you must have one of these. Do you know we feed them on milk for six days before cooking them? You have to lure the live snails out of the shell, fatten them up until they're too big to get back in."

Geoff shook his head; the strong smell of garum wafting out from the kitchen had taken away his appetite. "Listen, I just want you to ask around—"

Marcus waved a hand—waving him quiet, Geoff thought, until a waiter appeared with another tray. "Geoffrey, I will do this if it makes you happy, but let me explain," he said. The waiter uncovered the tray, revealing a plate ringed with what looked like a dozen perfectly oval white mice.

"Fine," Geoffrey said. "Tell me again how I don't understand the Roman mind. I was only born on a farm on the Tiber."

"And came here when you were, what? Ten? You're a modern, Geoffrey. You dress like one, sound like one, *smell* like one." Marcus reached into the salt cellar, pinched and sprinkled across the plate. "Trust nobody until you have eaten much salt with him," he said. "Cicero, of course."

"That's just what I'm saying—a lot of us fit in perfectly well. We're not all determined to relive the last days of Pompeii like you are."

"Ha—you say Pompeii like it was something. In my day it was a fishing village; there were a thousand like it. It was just lucky to get buried alive. But listen, Geoffrey, here is what I want to say. There are two types of Romans, and they are both missing something here. The first type is the everyday sort of man, the worker, and here he cannot work. We had the same problem in my time, of course, but back then we had laws against slaves taking too much of the jobs."

"We don't have slaves anymore," Geoffrey said.

Marcus waved expansively towards the kitchen. "What are you talking about? Look in there, see how many slaves there are."

Geoff frowned. "Marcus—if someone is keeping slaves—"

"No—machines, that do a man's work. *Robota*, it means slave, you know this; and Čapek, he too was a Slav, a slave by nature, as that sheep-fucker Aristotle said. When machines cook and wash dishes and do the work of a hundred, what is an ordinary man to do? He has no money to set himself in trade, so he gets himself in trouble for want of something to occupy him."

"Okay—assume you're right," Geoff said, putting up his hands. "How do you know that's not happening to Fulvia's son?"

"Because he is the other kind of Roman—the kind who is missing his manhood. The ordinary fellow is happy with a day's work for a day's pay, but a man of good family needs leisure, time to give over to a profession. He needs to do his civic duty, contribute to his city, but where is it now? Buried and paved over, infested with Cisalpine rabble."

"So is that what I should tell Fulvia? That Attius can't be in trouble because he's missing his manhood?"

"Well, maybe not like *that*," Marcus said, cocking an eyebrow. "Listen, Geoffrey, this boy—he's from a good family, he knows with his father gone he has responsibilities. He'll be okay."

Geoff sighed, picked up one of the egg-mice and put it in his mouth. His molars cracked down on something hard and a hot, bitter taste washed through him. "I knew you were putting me on with these," he said, his eyes watering. "Nobody ever ate this, Roman or not."

"Well, not the eyes," Marcus said. "Those are cloves. What are you, a barbarian?"

Geoff was starting up his car when he saw a figure by the restaurant's back door, illuminated by the headlights. Geoff rolled down his window and called his name.

Attius turned, looked at him and bolted for the street. Geoff fumbled with the handle to get out, but by the time he had the door open the boy was gone.

Geoff stood in the parking lot, weighing Marcus' words against what he had just seen. Of course, running wasn't always a sign of guilt, but it didn't look good. Still, Marcus was right about one thing—the idea of a kid like Attius running around with a gang, getting into fights, just *felt* wrong. He remembered Attius from his earlier visits to the Columellae: a serious kid, well enough integrated, small for his age but mature—not unlike Geoff himself had been. One of his success stories, he had always thought.

The next afternoon Geoff drove to the high school Attius attended. It was a typical mid-sixties monstrosity, modified a dozen times in response to growing and shrinking enrollment; an added ring spurred off of the original square building, with portable classroom trailers clustered around the parking lot entrance. After checking in with the office, showing his ID and passing through the metal detector—this place had as much security as the Welcome Center—he climbed up to the third floor and started counting down classrooms to 326. He knocked at the door, saw the teacher within glance up from the overhead projector and throw him a look of annoyance.

"Sorry," Geoff said, holding up the call slip the office had given him. The class had erupted in chatter as soon as the teacher's attention was distracted, and he felt the weight of her gaze on him. "I need to see Attius Columella."

"They usually phone," the teacher said, brushing her dark hair away from her face. Geoff shrugged, and she turned back to the class. "Attius, this man needs to see you." Then, to Geoff: "Make sure he comes right back when he's done."

Geoff watched the class as Attius rose, and listened: most of the chatter was in barracks Latin, half the boys in the class wearing toga tops or Not Fallen T-shirts. Attius did not share in either look: instead he wore a short-sleeved red shirt over jeans, and his hair was cut in a modern style.

"My name's Geoff—Galfridius," Geoff said, closing the classroom door. "I've come to see your mother a few times, check on how you and she are doing. Do you remember me?"

Attius nodded. "Is my mother all right?" he asked.

"That's not what I'm here about," Geoff said. He half-crouched, looked Attius in the eye. "Why did you run last night? When I saw you at Mello's?"

"I didn't know that was you," Attius said after too long of a pause. He glanced back at the classroom. "I thought it was some guys who were after me."

"Some guys," Geoff said. "Anything you need to tell me about?"

"No," Attius said quickly. "It was just—you know, these jerks . . ."

"Uh-huh." Geoff stood up to his full height. "You saw me before you ran. I called your name."

Looking away, Attius said "I thought you were someone else."

"Are you working for Marcus? Mister Apicius?"

Attius said nothing.

"It's important you tell me, Attius. If he's got you mixed up in something—"

"It's not like that," Attius said, scowling.

"Then what's it like? It might not just be you in trouble here . . ."

"What are they going to do? Deport us?" Attius said, looking up at him.

Geoff took a breath. "Not every prefugee has it as good as you and your mother do—you go to school here, you know that. You could lose the subsidy on your apartment, your mother could lose her work permit . . ."

"It's not like that," Attius said after a long silence. "He's just—some of us want better, you know?"

"You're a smart kid, Attius. You can go anywhere in this world if you just stay focused."

"Yeah, in this world. What good is that? I go to college, get a job, turn into a modern like you—what good does any of that do the ones we left behind?"

Geoff sighed. It was a common enough attitude among the prefugees, especially the young boys: to succeed in the modern world was a betrayal of their own culture and people—better to spend your days drunk on the triclinium, blasting hex-hop on the stereo and dreaming of past glory. He was surprised to hear it from Attius, though. "So what were you doing at the restaurant?" he asked. "He sells you and your friends a little wine, you reminisce about way back in the day?"

Attius looked at him for a moment, then laughed. "No, it's nothing like that," he said, shaking his head. "He's going to take us *home*."

"Are you crazy?" Geoff asked, pushing open the door to Marcus's condo.

"Do come in," Marcus said. He was wearing a house toga and sandals, took a careful step back from the doorway. "Make yourself at home; I do, but then I live here."

"Don't," Geoff said, pointing a finger at Marcus. "Don't do that—that injured gravitas thing you do. This is important." He paused for breath. Once through the door, Marcus's apartment might easily have been a villa; the tiled floor was inlaid with a mosaic of a dog and the words CAVE CANEM, while three triclinia covered with red silk cushions were arranged in a triangle. Steam was wafting from one of the inner doorways.

"I was about to have a bath," Marcus said mildly. "Will you join me? The tepidarium is a bit small, but there's steam enough for two."

"What are you trying to do? These kids, they don't have enough money to make them worth grifting."

A tiny flicker of genuine concern crossed Marcus's face. "You spoke to Attius, I suppose?" he asked. Geoff nodded, and Marcus crossed to one of the triclinia and sat down. "Well. Have a seat, then, and we'll talk about it."

Geoff moved to a triclinium and sat on it upright, as though it was a bench. "Talk, then."

"Why don't you start, Geoffrey? Just what did he tell you?"

"He said—" Geoff paused, took a breath. "He thinks you can take him home."

"Ah." Marcus reached up to scratch at his jaw; he was, unusually, unshaven, and a shadow had covered his cheeks and chin. "Well. There it is, then."

"Wait," Geoff said after a moment had passed. "You're serious? The fis-sures don't work that way, you know that."

"Do you?" Marcus asked. "Do you know it, truly? Or have you been told it?"

"It *can't* work that way. The paradox—"

"Spoken like a modern. Some of us have faith in our gods to bring us home."

Geoff held up a hand. "Forget that for now, I need to understand this. You're going to take a bunch of kids back and then—what? Nuke Carthage, shoot Goths with machine guns?"

"Carthago delenda est," Marcus said, not smiling. "You should know that. We don't need to bring guns or bombs; once we're home, we can build everything we need—enough, anyway. My boys have studied well for this."

"Is your life really so bad? This city is full of opportunities—"

"Can you call it a city?" Marcus asked. "No gymnasium, no theater, no forum? Where is the life a Roman man should lead?"

"You really believe it," Geoff said. "This whole thing, you really think you can do it." He shook his head. "Just how do you expect to get into the Welcome Center?"

Marcus frowned, an actor's impression of sorrow. "For that part, regretably, guns will be necessary. But there's no reason anyone has to be hurt, Geoffrey—"

"You idiot," Geoff said, rising to his feet. "If there's even a chance that



you're right, the guards will have orders to shoot to kill—they let one person through and all of history could be changed."

"Regrettable, as I said. But I see no choice, and anyway Mars must always have his due."

"You—I work at the Welcome Center, Marcus. I could get you in." Geoff turned away. "You didn't even *ask* me."

For a long time neither of them spoke, both watching each other's faces.

"You, Galfridius?" Marcus said at last.

Geoff took a step toward the door, paused. "I'm still a Roman."

"You might have told the police."

Turning back to face Marcus, Geoff said "I haven't, have I?"

Marcus shook his head. "Will you?"

"Are you—you're really going through with this?" Geoff asked. Marcus nodded. "What I do, it helps our people, here and now. I'm not chasing some crazy revenge fantasy."

"I commend you for it. The great majority of our people benefit very much from what you do."

Geoff began to turn away again, stopped. "I can get you in," he said at last. "Nobody has to get hurt."

"No," Marcus said. "I can't let you. Your job—"

Geoff shook his head. "My job isn't going to get any easier if a dozen Romans get killed breaking into a Welcome Center. I still don't think this is going to work, but I can at least keep any blood from being shed."

"Are you sure?" Marcus asked, cocking an eyebrow. "We can't afford to have anyone who isn't committed."

"I'll do it—but you're not bringing any kids. That's my condition."

Marcus regarded Geoff for a long moment, nodded slowly. "All right, then," he said. "How soon can you get us in?"

Between visiting the Aemiliani, the restaurant, the school and Marcus's apartment Geoff had been away from the office for most of two days; not an unusually long time, given the nature of his job, but long enough for a pile of message slips to accumulate on his desk. Flipping through them he found several from Fulvia Columella, on each of which both the PLEASE CALL and WILL CALL BACK boxes were checked. He picked up his phone and started dialing, stopped halfway through.

"Problem?" Wayne said.

Geoff shook his head as he turned in his chair. Wayne's bulky shape filled the doorway, all straight lines and skin so dark it shone; though about half the case officers were resettled Romans like Geoff, everyone from Wayne on up were moderns. "No, just a bit behind."

Wayne did not move from the doorway, regarding Geoff with narrowed eyes. "You've been out a lot. Anything I should know about?"

"Nothing unusual," Geoff said, shrugged. "Why do you ask?"

"Just checking on workload," Wayne said, his tone suddenly casual. He absent-mindedly picked Geoff's stapler up off his desk, pulled it open. "OT budget's tapped for the quarter, you know."

Geoff rolled his eyes, nodded. "I know, I know," he said; then, as Wayne slowly turned to go, "Hey, Wayne—where's your family from?"

"Toronto."

"No, you know—before that."

"Sierra Leone, on my dad's side—his mother came over about forty years ago." Wayne snapped the stapler shut. "Why do you ask?"

"Just curious," Geoff said. "You know much about it?"

Wayne shrugged. "My dad took me when I was about ten."

"You ever think about going back?"

"Nah. Dad used to send money home, when he could."

"How about you?" Geoff asked.

Wayne's brow furrowed into a slight frown. "I've got a family to take care of, Geoff. Wife and three kids—they've all got a life they wouldn't have if my grandma hadn't come here."

"I know," Geoff said.

"How about you?" Wayne asked. He dropped Geoff's stapler back onto his desk. "How come you don't have all that Roman shit like the other guys do?"

Geoff glanced back at his desk; the only personal item on it was the calendar illustrated with erotic frescoes from Pompeii, a gag gift from his colleagues. "Just not my thing, I guess."

"Know what you mean," Wayne said, turning to leave. "You need help with anything, let me know, okay?"

"Sure," Geoff said. He watched Wayne go back out into the hall, counted to ten before turning back to his desk and the problem at hand. It wasn't enough just to get Marcus's people into the building; they had to be there when a fissure was open, when the Center would be at its busiest. And, of course, even if he got them into the reception room there would be no way to get them back out again other than through the fissure. If Marcus was wrong . . .

Geoff's phone rang, the call display panel showing Fulvia's number. He briefly considered pretending to be out, keyed the call to go through to his wire. "Hello, Mrs. Columella," he said.

"Galfridius, it's Fulvia Columella." Some technologies seemed forever obscure to the Romans that had come as adults, call display among them. "Did you to my son talk?"

"Yes."

"Well, is Attius in trouble?"

"I don't think so," Geoff said carefully.

"It's only I haven't seen him," Fulvia said, "not since the day you were here. Did he to you anything say, about somewhere going?"

Geoff shut his eyes. "I'm sorry, Fulvia," he said. "I saw him yesterday at school, but he didn't say anything about not coming home." *Not exactly, anyway.* "Does he ever stay over at a friend's, maybe?"

"I phoned."

"I'll look into it," Geoff said. "Was there anything else you wanted?"

There was a moment's pause before Fulvia said "No. No, Galfridius, thank you."

Geoff nodded—the wire would transmit it—hung up. He should call the school, he thought, find out if Attius had been in class. The thought of school started his mind down a suddenly obvious path, and he opened the

second drawer of his desk and took out the emergency handbook. He had been thinking like a bureaucrat, when he should have been thinking like a student: his own high school had been just as paranoid as Attius's, but there had been one thing sure to throw it into chaos.

The warning tone sounded over the PA as the sensors detected a fissure forming. Geoff, sitting in his office, was on call: if his name came up his pager would let him know to go to the reception room. Without waiting for that, he picked up the phone and dialed.

"It's on," he said as soon as the line picked up. "Twenty minutes."

Hanging up, Geoff got up from his desk and stepped into the hall. There was no visible increase in activity, but he knew that forces were mustering to keep the refugees that would soon arrive in the reception room—and, more importantly to him, keep anyone else out: guards were on alert, doors inside and out automatically locked. He strolled casually to the southwest corner of the building, where most of the offices were unoccupied, checked his watch. When fifteen minutes had passed he reached up and pulled the fire alarm, and a piercing wail filled the air.

Now the halls were busy: it had been months since the last fire drill, and few people remembered where their fire exit was. Geoff heard frantic steps echoing as the inhabitants fled. Only a few passed by him on their way out, and they were too busy to notice he was not following; once the halls were quiet Geoff went to the reception room. The most sensitive place in the building, its doors automatically stayed locked even when the alarm sounded—except when a fissure had formed; nobody wanted refugees trapped in a sealed room during a fire.

Marcus reached the door just a minute after Geoff did. A half-dozen young men followed him, each in his teens or early twenties, all dressed in jacket, shirt and jeans. Geoff scanned their faces, felt only a little surprise at seeing Attius among them.

"I said no kids," he said to Marcus. "We had a deal."

"These are my soldiers," Marcus said. "We couldn't go ahead otherwise." He put his hands on his hips, looked to left and right. "And you, Geoffrey, did you betray me? Are the police waiting for us in there?"

"No," Geoff said.

"Then all our games are played, and we know who is the victor." Marcus cocked an eyebrow, awaiting a challenge.

"What are you waiting for?" one of Marcus's followers said. "Let's go."

Geoff looked at him, then at the other young men, found he recognized them all: each was a success story like Attius, the ones that had managed to overcome the poverty and dislocation. Each one was a boy without a father; each, he now saw, was a boy whom he had failed. "Are you all sure about this?" Geoff asked the boy who had spoken—Gallienus, he was called—moving slightly to stand in front of the doorway. "You know, even if you can go through, we get refugees from all different periods. You might wind up anytime *ab urbe conditum*."

"We'll manage," Marcus said.

Not looking at him, Geoff spoke to Attius. "You won't have a family, you know, or land of your own. You'll be all alone, and penniless."

Attius looked doubtful for a moment, while Gallienus took a step toward the door. "Not for long," he said. "With everything we know about chemistry, and mining—"

"And everyone knows the Romans loved change," Geoff said. "That's why they invented the steam engine." A few of the boys looked to one another, brows furrowed. "And the compass, and the printing press. They just loved new ideas."

"He's just stalling," Marcus said. "Upset at being tricked, so he hopes to keep us here 'til the police arrive." He took a step closer, so that he and Geoff were nose to nose. "Step aside, Geoffrey."

Geoff shrugged, moved aside to let the others pass through the doorway and then followed them into the reception room. Inside the light was starting to flicker as the fissure opened; after a moment four dark figures appeared within, three short and one tall.

"Now," Marcus said.

Holding up a hand, Geoff said, "Just a minute. Why don't you see where it is you're headed?"

The figures in the fissure were fully visible now: a woman and three children, each dirty, disheveled and gaunt with starvation. The eldest was a boy of about ten or eight; he wore a gladius at his belt, so oversized on him that the tip grazed the floor. When he saw the group awaiting them his hand went to the hilt.

"It's all right, little boy," Marcus said, then turned back to the others. "Get through, while it's still open."

The boy looked up at the woman behind him, then moved to stand in front of her and drew his sword with both hands. "Don't worry, mother," he said in deeply archaic Latin. "I'll protect you."

Marcus's followers stood still, uncertain. Attius looked to Marcus, then to Geoffrey. "What do we do?" he asked.

The light of the fissure was starting to dim, and Marcus took a step forward. "He's just a boy," he said, reaching out to seize the sword.

"Not anymore," Geoff said quietly. "He has to take care of his mother now, and his sisters. He's a man." He moved behind Marcus, took hold of his wrist and drew it away from the boy's sword. Then, moving Marcus out of the way, he crouched to speak with the boy at eye-level. "Welcome, friend," he said in the same early Latin the boy had spoken. "What is your name?"

The boy glanced over his shoulder, to where the light of the fissure was flickering. "My name is Quintus Rufinus," he said, working hard to deepen his voice. "Tell me where we are."

"It is a safe place," Geoff said, "far from the dangers you have fled. You must make a choice, though: if you stay here you can never go back." He straightened up to his full height. "Would you like to stay?"

Quintus gripped the hilt of his sword with both hands, looked back at his mother; the fading light flickered on her face as the boy turned back to Geoff, nodded twice.

Geoff's hand paused over the Pompeii calendar, finally picked it up and dropped it into the box containing the few contents of his desk. He took a breath, turned as he sensed Wayne's bulk filling the doorway.

"You leaving, then?" Wayne said, clearing his throat.

"Yeah. Sorry for the short notice."

"Don't worry about me. Where you going?"

"I don't know yet." Geoff shrugged. "I just know these kids need something the Center can't give them, and right now they're getting it from the wrong place."

Wayne nodded. "Fair enough," he said. "This wouldn't have anything to do with that mess the other day, would it?"

Turning back to his box, Geoff took a breath. "Why?" he asked. "Did you talk to the police about it?"

"Didn't see any reason to—just an unscheduled fire drill, right?"

"Right." Geoff stood still for a moment, turned around once more. "Wayne—*could* you go through the fissure? Go back?"

Wayne looked at him for a long time before finally speaking. "Would it make a difference?" he asked. "Would you go, if you could?"

Geoff shook his head. "No," he said. "I've got a family to take care of." ○

## CHILDREN

Every dusty village has its roadway out, and not one blue-limned talisman that's hung on twine inside the door for health, protection or abundance can prevent the exodus of blood, the empty chair pushed to the wall, the dog's small, potent sighs. You feel relief when children leave, and guilt because of that, regret their raising was accomplished while accompanied with so much failure. But they're gone. No charm could hold them back without a twist of pain and rage. You miss them, so you send along one tiny, hope-forged amulet that's fired with prayers, a delicate, complex design etched on a bracelet, made to wish that they'll be safe. Such magic as you have, perhaps forgotten on some shelf, the best that you could do, you gave. It's on to all those little things you always dreamed of doing. Your own life.



—P M F Johnson

# THE ADVOCATE

Barry B. Longyear

Barry B Longyear, author of "Enemy Mine" (September 1979), is still the only author to win the Nebula, Hugo, and John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer in the same year. After a very long absence, we are delighted to welcome him back to the pages of *Asimov's* with "The Advocate." The author tells us this story follows his philosophy of " 'writing jujitsu,' which involves taking all those things preventing one's writing and turning them into stories. Using a Palm TE2, this tale was written almost entirely in hospitals and doctors' waiting rooms."

**T**he point of this exercise, Dr. Hunter, is to relieve me of the eternal burdens of appointments, health plans, mind-numbing medications, nitrous-inhaling physicians, and malpractice-paralyzed neurologists so that I may do this thing I do: *Write Stories*. I've seen my last needle, spent my last hour in a waiting room, and explained for the absolutely last time how important it is for a writer to have a working brain and that, without such keeping the remainder at temperature is a medical, not literary, ambition. From now on let Craig deal with all of that, for that is what I have named my imprint bio. I have copied my engrams into a Biotronics stock meat suit, and he is fully authorized to advocate on my behalf concerning health matters. One of his chores is to keep track of me and pass on anything significant to the medical community, such as it is. I'm keeping a record of sorts to aid in this endeavor. It is my earnest hope that a cure to my ailment can be found—Craig will do all I could do to aid in that quest. If it will be one big waste of time, though, I won't be the one who is wasting it. I'll be writing.

Ta,

Larry Cragan (send)

Note: Call Jennifer tomorrow and find out how I can work having Craig pay all the bills, take care of the correspondence, and maintain the house, too, without signing over my power of attorney. This could be the answer to several of my prayers. (Encrypt).



\* \* \*

Craig. I decided to call the biological carrier of my imprint Craig because—well, you look like a Craig. Have you seen the Biotronics brochure? I don't know whose DNA was used, but you look like a used-car salesman who aspires to higher things: New cars, perhaps. Excepting that you haven't been around long enough to complete first grade, I would've pegged you as a college football hero.

I've been looking into getting back to that novel set in Ancient Rome, the one about St. George. The maps, notes, papers—everything is covered in heaps of dust and the occasional dead insect. Get the materials down for me and clean them up.

On the health front, headaches at normal levels, eating okay, not taking any of the medications, which I think has lessened my nausea.

I want to go back to drinking coffee. Go buy some. You know what kind.  
Larry (file)

Creepy looking at that strange face knowing that the brain behind it is identical to mine—*Was* identical to mine. With each passing second our experiences differ more. Leave us not forget I carry the Nuyune's Disease. Yes, leave us not forget, except that's what Nuyune's Disease does.

What's that?

What Nuyune's Disease does?

Yes. What's it do?

I'm afraid I've forgotten—oh, that's right! Presenile dementia. Nuyune's Disease causes one to forget.

Thanks. I'd forgotten.

Find us—find me a cure, Craig.

Note: I wonder if Craig will come up with ideas different from my own. Different paths lead to different experiences. Different input results in different output. Will I need to remind him to write down our (his) story ideas? He is a writer, after all. Never made a sale, but has all the experience. If Craig's ideas differ from my own and my own experience, are they truly *my* ideas? I don't want them if they're *his*.

Bigger problem: I may have to invent a new pronoun.

I've neither filed, sent, nor encrypted any of the last few entries. Screw it. Craig, I can't be bothered. You know what needs to be done. A patient must be his own best advocate, they say, and that is your mission. Go and advocate. Just take care of the stuff.

We have to meet as infrequently as possible, Craig. I can't put the threat of Nuyune's aside and concentrate on writing if you're hanging about all the time. I know I've been using you like an errand boy and I apologize (to myself yet!). Craig, you say it bothers you to see me, too. Your legitimate papers came through and I have you on the payroll. Money, freedom, a brain: Go get a room.

Doesn't like to see me but he sure doesn't mind seeing himself in his new body. Thirty pounds lighter, thirty years younger, lots of hair, no back pain, two working knees—his brain isn't turning into a neurofibrillary jungle either. Bastard.

Envy myself: strange sensation—

Oh. Brain note: Trying to sort out the St. George project notes. What a mess. Can't seem to get it together. Maybe I'll get started on that fantasy novel I wanted to do. Set in the thirties about the young girl from Alabama whose parents die and she has to go live with an uncle she's never met in Maine. Forget the damned plot now . . .

*... and Uncle Gregor awakened to find he had become a giant black fly—*  
Maybe something else.

What is the easiest kind of story to write? A how-to. So, what do I know how to do? I can write, but I already wrote that book. Used to collect coins until I got bored with it. Skiing, until the knees went. Hunt-and-peck piano playing. Some squirt and dabble watercolors. How-to. How about a mediocrity how-to: *How-To Not Do Anything Really Well*, split infinitive and all.

*One Hundred and One Steps to Step One Hundred and Two.*  
Health. Feeling slower. Stupider. Knuckles hurt. Very low.

Carla just left, Craig. My sister wants to know why I just don't cut-and-paste my imprint into a bio and turn sick old Larry into fertilizer. I told her doing it the way I did it seemed like a good idea at the time.

Well, why not do it now, she wanted to know.

A problem with that, Carla. See, I can already tell there's substantial erosion of Larry's mental faculties, much of it in recall memory. The whole point of preserving Craig's imprint intact was . . . oh, I dunno: *to preserve his imprint intact!* What would be the point of copying over it with an imprint eaten full of holes by some damned disease?

Well, then why not simply let Craig go on and zero out Larry, she'd like to know?

Zero out; that means to blank out the brain, leaving the medical community free to pick through the leftovers: An eyeball here, a lung there, a liver here, whatever. What do you think, Craig? We turn me into giblets and you go on and write?

What the hell. Call Jennifer and ask if there's a legal way to do that now. On second thought, I better ask her. If you ask her it'd sound like you might be planning something naughty.

Installed the voice recognition software. Getting tough controlling my fingers. Wonder if it makes any difference.

Tough to put all this aside. The words get on the paper but it's like pulling teeth. Three to five thousand words a day, finished and ready to send to an editor: I remember taking that kind of production for granted. God, what an ungrateful snot I was when I was young. Lucky if I get that out in a week now, and although it may be all through, it's not finished.

Haven't heard from Craig in three weeks. Four weeks. Told him not to

call unless he had really important news. Guess he hasn't any important news. Check in anyway, Craig. I miss you, or me, you-me. Never did invent that damned pronoun. Youme? Meyou? Meow.

Wonder what I'd do if I was no longer chained to a desk. Good back, strong legs, a bright future, a decrepitating alter ego back home in the wings. I used to ski. Loved it. Still dream about it. I wonder if Craig can ski. I know he wants to. Lot more fun than taking care of Larry. I'll ask myself if I ever see me again.

Wet the bed last night. I can rebel against the damned diapers all I want, but cleanup is a bitch.

*"The Blue Dragon Project? Remember it?"* Craig asks on the phone.

I think for a moment. Something about ghosts in Blue Dragon Lake. "What about it?"

*"Barlow over at Knopf wants to see it. I talked to him a few days ago and he called to tell me Jefferson will get a contract offer by messenger. He doesn't even want to see a written proposal. Jefferson just gave me the okay. It's a great deal, Larry."*

Jefferson?

*"What about it?"*

"Craig, aren't you supposed to be finding out how to help me beat this damned disease? I'm doing the writing. You go find a cure."

Big sigh. *"Right. Call Jefferson, will you?"* and he hung up.

Jefferson.

I look in the address book. Only one Jefferson in it. Jefferson Dunn. Literary agent. But my agent . . . No, Carly Tommasino. She died, didn't she? Couldn't remember going to Carly's funeral. Crappy agent anyway. Didn't know the first damned thing about Hollywood.

What was I . . . Jefferson.

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There is "Blue Dragon" scribbled on my doodle pad. There's a folder in the file cabinet titled "Blue Dragon Lake." Letter from me in the folder to Jefferson Dunn. Says we've known each other for some years.

*Jefferson Dunn. Jefferson Dunn.*

*I'm a ring-tailed coot and a son-of-a-gun.*

Why am I holding this damned folder?

Bide-A-Wee. Happy Valley. Golden Wrinkles. Sagging Damned Arches. Can't remember the name of this stupid assisted living center—nursing home—boneyard—to save my soul.

"Your computer is there, Mr. Cragan, and your chair, all your books and files. Your son hooked up everything. You'll be back to writing in no time."

"Who?"

"Your son, Craig, Mr. Cragan." The young woman in the olive pantsuit jabbars some more, but it strikes me at last:—Cragan. My last name is Cragan. Is that why meow—I named the other me Craig?

Looked like a Craig. Thought that's why . . .

"Miss."

She freezes in mid-sentence. Nice face. Red hair. Always liked red hair. Bet she can dance. "Yes?"

"Where am I? The name of this place?"

Her voice goes up about fifty decibels. "North Valley. North Valley Living Center? On Bonny Road? This is Room One-Eighty. This is your room."

"Not hard of hearing, lady. Just couldn't recall the name."

I turn away and look at the bed. Blue blanket from home. My own pillow. Try out the bed. Not bad. Rubber mattress protector. Smart. Hate those pissy-smelling mattresses.

Door opens and there he is. "Settling in okay?" he asks.

"Craig." I laugh as I look at him from the bed. "Craig Cragan?"

He looks at her. "Can we have a few moments, please?"

She nods, goes away, closes the door.

"Didn't Craig Cragan seem silly for a name?" I ask him as I sit up.

"It wasn't my choice."

"My choice. Actually, meow choice . . ." Aw, now I forget the damned point—

He places a hand on my shoulder. "Larry, Dr. Hunter at the institute wants to see you."

"Hunter?"

"Yes. You remember the Lanford Institute? Dr. Hunter?"

"No."

Craig is impatient with me. "—Got promising results in one of his trials. Just announced it. Maybe not a complete recovery, but real progress. He's convinced—"

"Hunter."

He holds me by the shoulders, looks down at me. "Larry." He closes his eyes, shakes his head, and says, "Dammit, I can't stand seeing you like this."

"Hell, Craig. You should see it from where I am."

He hugs me and I cry a little.

"Tomorrow I'll pick you up and we'll go see Dr. Hunter. Okay?"

"Okay."

"He'll help us. He's got to."

"Why the computer, Craig. Books and all. Can't write. Can't write any more."

"Keep talking out your journal, Larry. Understand? You have to keep functioning. As each path is shut down you have to force open a new one."

"Hard. Dammit, it's hard."

"Tomorrow. We'll see what Dr. Hunter says tomorrow. We're going to get some good news."

Dinner was okay. Meatloaf, peas, baked potato. Love baked potato. Chocolate ice cream. Lots of old women there at that place.

Talk all around me like mosquitoes buzzing. Craig. Guy in a white coat, skinny girl with gray hair, big glasses. Noise, lights, machines, panels, screens. I'm all worn out from being stuck in machines, needles and tubes stuck in me. Floor below this one they got monkeys. Got names. Julie can't get up. Just stares. Blinks once in awhile. Mostly stares.

Jasper is up though. He's got Nuyen or Noonan's Disease but he's up now. Pushing buttons. Making marks show on a screen. I can do that, but not always the right marks.

Big glasses says to Craig things very promising. Research very promising—for early cases.

Too late for latecomers.

"Lawrence, I'm terribly sorry," she says to me.

"I'm Larry."

"There was a misunderstanding. Cases as advanced as yours—"

"I want to say good-bye to Julie."

Craig drives me back to Crappy Valley. So sad. No words for me.

Dinner with all the old women at the place. An old man there now. Frank. Used to be a farmer. Speaks hard against the son who put him here. Calls his son some names that light up those old women. Most of them. One old woman—Betty—giggles. Lemon pie for dessert. My favorite.

Outside sun. Nice wind on my face. Pearl is with me so I can find way back. Pretty flowers. Roses, Sweet Williams, Bachelor Buttons, and the ones with the tough name beginning with high or hy—

"Hydrangea?" says Pearl. Cute face. Really strong, too. Picked up that whole man once. Bigger'n me. No. Not Pearl. The *man*! The *man* was bigger'n me. The night I had lemon pie—Frank.

Frank didn't know either. "Hyacinth?" he says man in my room.

"What's that?"

He's there. Looks so sad. Don't know why he comes to see me if he's going to be sad all the time. Pulls me down. Must be something fun about farming he can talk about.

"What about pigs?" I ask him. "Chickens, horses. What about cows?"

"What are you talking about? You were trying to remember the name of a flower that began with *high*."

Man shakes his head and goes back to packing boxes. "You're not Frank," I tell him.

"I'm Craig."

This one is cleaning all this old junk out of my room. Files. Papers. Books. Now that computer's gone, have room for a television. See TV in rec room but don't want to watch *Footballers' Wives* and *Okra*. On my own TV I can watch Spongebob.

He brings in the TV and hooks it up. Looks away quick. Crybaby. Silly.

Turkey, mashed potatoes, gravy, and cranberry sauce tonight. Custard for dessert. Gave mine to Betty. Hate custard. Watched Spongebob on TV.

Book. Meow book?

Blue cover with green words. Man give it to me like I should know what it is. Craig.

"It's *Blue Dragon Lake*."

"No pictures in it."

"Look. Your name's on it. It's your novel, *Blue Dragon Lake*."

"I don't see any dragons. Spaghetti tonight, Pearl said." I laugh and give him back his book. "Funny dessert name, too."

"Yeah," he says, taking the book from me. "Good to have something to look forward to. *Blue Dragon* is up for a National Book Award, you know that?"

"You should put pictures in your book. Know any funny dessert names? It's not a bear claw. I thought of that one myself."

He puts the book in a blue bag, drops the bag on the bed, and stands still for a time. He looks at me. "Is it spumoni?"

"Is what spumoni?"

"The funny dessert name."

"I don't know. What's spumoni?"

He turns back to the bag, takes a rag and a little bottle from it. Pours stuff from the bottle on the rag.

"What's that, Craig?"

"Something to help you. Forgive me, Larry," he says and the man turns and sticks this rag in my face. *In my face!* Believe that? Never hurt this guy in my life, except tell him about his ugly dumb book with no pictures.

Choke, dizzy, bad smell, and I push him away hard with a kick. Coughing. I look down and he's on my yellow rug. Bet he hit his head, too. Make me sniff his old rag. Bastard.

Spongebob's on. Rolled Craig under the bed, hung a blanket down. He's pretty cold. Saw a dead mouse next to the path to the gazebo. Man looks like that, except for maybe the whiskers and tail. Real still. Like that. Eyes dead.

Tell Pearl. After dinner, though.

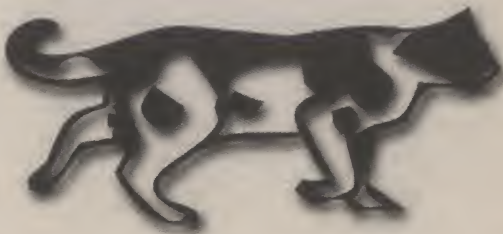
Spaghetti, tonight. And *pistachio* ice cream. *That* was the funny name. Pistachio. I like words. Forget why. O



## ROBOT CAT

Each hair is a photovoltaic cell that powers the robot cat's intricate mechanics and programming. There are multiple gyroscopes which assure balance and always landing on its mini-hydraulic legs. The advanced vision, across all spectrums, and now used by the military, is also used for telescopic, microscopic, as well as basic night vision. It senses pests and environmental problems with extensive monitors and crystal databases, uploading continually to the house smart system. The cat is programmed to be a companion for the children, yet still retain its "cat-ness," its claws providing vaccinations and blood testing on a regular basis; its tongue providing other health information as well. With so many duties, is it any wonder the cat sleeps so frequently in the sun, charging its batteries and processing data, communicating with the house system, its tail, antenna for the wireless network, moving constantly; sometimes it purrs.

—Roger Dutcher



# THE ROOM OF LOST SOULS

Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Kristine Kathryn Rusch's latest novel is *The Recovery Man* (Roc 2007), the latest stand-alone book in the award-nominated Retrieval Artist series. The author just completed a book tour of France for her Kris Nelscott mystery series. Yet, with all this novel writing, she still finds time for shorter works. Recent tales include novellas in Mike Resnick's *Alien Crimes* and Lou Anders' upcoming *Sideways in Crime*, along with stories for *Asimov's*, and other SF and mystery magazines. In "The Room of Lost Souls," Kris presents us with a deep-space mystery. This tale revisits the milieu of her December 2005 Readers' Award winning novella, "Diving Into the Wreck."

**T**he old spacer's bar on Longbow Station is the only bar there that doesn't have a name. No name, no advertising across the door or the back wall, no cute little logos on the magnetized drinking cups. The door is recessed into a grungy wall that looks like it's temporary due to construction.

To get in, you need one of two special chips. The first is hand-held—given by the station manager after careful consideration. The second is built into your ID. You get that one if you're a legitimate spacer, operating or working for a business that requires a pilot's license.

I have had the second chip since I was the first woman ever to join a crew on an until-then male only freighter. I was just eighteen years old. I've been using the chip more and more these last few years, since I discovered a wrecked Dignity Vessel that I thought I could mine for gold.

Instead, that ship mined me.

Now I take tourists to established wrecks all over this sector. I coordinate the trip, collect the money and hire the divers who'll make those tourists believe they're doing real wreck-diving.

Tourists never do real wreck diving. It's too dangerous. The process gets its name from the dangers: in olden days, wreck diving was called space diving to differentiate it from the planet-side practice of diving into the oceans.

We don't face water here—we don't have its weight or its unusual properties, particularly at huge depths. We have other elements to concern us: No gravity, no oxygen, extreme cold.

Those risks exist no matter what kind of wrecks we dive. So I minimize everything else: I make sure the wrecks are known, mapped, and harmless.

I haven't lost any tourists. But I have lost friends to real wreck diving. And several times, I've almost lost myself.

I haven't been real wreck diving since the Dignity Vessel. I've turned down other wreck divers who heard I wasn't going out on my own anymore and wanted me to supervise their dives.

What those divers don't understand is that I was supervising the Dignity Vessel when I lost two divers and destroyed three friendships.

I can't stomach doing that again.

So mostly, I camp at Longbow Station. I bought a berth here, something I vowed I'd never do, but I don't spend a lot of time in it. Instead, I sit in the old spacer's bar and listen to the stories. Sometimes I make up a few of my own.

When I need money, I take tourists to established wrecks. Theoretically, those dives make everyone happy—the tourists because they've had a "real" experience; the divers because they got to practice their skills; and me, because I make an obscene amount of money for very little work.

But obscene amounts of money don't do it for me. I bought the berth here so that I don't have to crawl back to my ship if I drink too much or feel like taking a half-hour nap. I haven't spent money on much else.

I used to use the money to finance my real passion—finding wrecks. I wasn't so much interested in salvage, although I'd been known to sell minor items.

I was interested in the history, in discovering a ship, in figuring out how it ended up where it was and why it got abandoned and what happened to its crew.

Over the years, I'd solved a few historical mysteries and found even more. I liked the not-knowing. I liked the discovery. I liked the exploration for exploration's sake.

And I loved the danger.

I miss that.

But every time I think on trying it again, I see the faces of the crew I lost: not just Jypé and Junior, who died horribly on that last trip, but Ahmed and Moïse and Egyed and Dita and Pnina and Ioni. All of them died diving.

All of them died diving with me.

I used to lull myself to sleep making up alternate scenarios, scenarios in which my friends lived.

I don't do that any more.

I don't do much any more. Except sit in the old spacer's bar on Longbow and wait for tourists to contact me for a job. Then I plan the visit, go to the wreck, plant some souvenirs, come back, pick up the tourists and give them the thrill of their lives.

With no danger, no risk.

No excitement.

The opposite of what I used to do.

She's land-born. I don't need to see her thick body with its heavy bones to know that. Her walk says it all.

The space-born have a grace—a lightness—to everything they do. Not all are thin-boned and fragile. Some have parents who think ahead, who raise them half in Earth Normal and half in zero-G. The bones develop, but that grace—that lightness—it develops, too.

This woman has a heaviness, a way of putting one foot in front of the other as if she expects the floor to take her weight. I used to walk like that. I spent my first fifteen years mostly planet-bound in real gravity.

We have the same build, she and I—that thickness which comes from strong bones, the fully formed female body that comes from the good nutrition usually found planetside.

I used to fight both of those things until I realized they gave me an advantage spacers usually don't have.

I don't break.

Grab a spacer wrong and her arms snap.

Grab me wrong, and I'll bruise.

She sits down, says my name as if she's entitled to, and then raises her eyebrows as if they and not the tone of her voice provide the question mark.

"How'd you get in here?" I pull my drink across the scarred plastic table and lean my chair against the wall. Balancing chairs feels like that second after the gravity gets shut off but hasn't yet vanished—a half-and-half feeling of being both weighted and weightless.

"I have an invitation," she says and holds up the cheap St. Christopher's medal that houses this week's guest chip. Station management shifts the chip housing every week or two so the chips can't be scalped or manufactured. After five guest chips are given out, management changes housing. There is no predictable time, nor is there predictable housing.

"I didn't invite you," I say, picking up my drink and balancing its edge on my flat stomach. I can't quite get the balance right and I catch the drink before it spills.

"I know," the woman says, "but I came to see you."

"If you want to hire my ship to do some wreck diving, go through channels. Send a message, my system'll scan your background, and if you pass, you can see any one of a dozen wrecks that're open to amateurs."

"I'm not interested in diving," the woman says.

"Then you have no reason to talk to me." I take a sip. The liquid, which

is a fake but tasty honey and butter ale, has warmed during the long afternoon. The warmth brings out the ale's flavor, which is why I nurse it—or at least why I say I nurse it. I don't like to get drunk—I hate the loss of control—but I like drinking and I like to sit in this dark, private, enclosed bar and watch people whom I know won't give me any guff.

"But I do have a reason to talk to you." She leans toward me. She has pale green eyes surrounded by dark lashes. The eyes make her seem even more exotic than her land-born walk does. "You see, I hear you're the best—"

My snort interrupts her. "There is no best. There's a half a dozen companies that'll take you touring wrecks—and that's without diving. All of us are certified. All of us are bonded and licensed and all of us guarantee the best touring experience in this sector. It just varies in degree—do you want the illusion of danger or do you want a little bit of history with your deep space adventure? I don't know who sent you in here—"

She starts to answer, but I raise a finger, stopping her.

"—and I don't care. I do want you to contact someone else for a tour. This is my private time, and I hate having it interrupted."

"I'm sorry," she says and the apology sounds sincere.

I expect her to get up, leave the bar or maybe move to another table, but she does neither.

Instead she leans closer and lowers her voice.

"I'm not a tourist," she says. "I have a mission and I'm told you're the only one who can help me."

In the two years since the Dignity Vessel, no one has tried this old con on me. In the twenty years before, I'd get one or two of these approaches a year, mostly from rivals wanting coordinates to the wrecks I refused to salvage.

I've always believed that certain wrecks have historical value only when they're intact—not a popular belief among salvagers and scavengers and most wreck divers—but one that I've adhered to since I started in this business at the ripe old age of eighteen.

I point to Karl, a slight but muscular diver who has the best reputation on Longbow. He's not very good at finding things, but he has his moments. He was with me on that last run and we haven't spoken since we docked.

"Karl's good," I say. "In fact, if you want real adventure, not the touristy kind, he's the best. He'll take you to deep space, no questions asked."

"I want you," the woman says.

I sigh. Maybe she does. Maybe she's been led astray by some old-timer. Maybe she thinks I still have some valuable coordinates locked in my ship.

I don't. I dumped pretty much everything the day I decided I would only do tourist runs.

"Please," she says. "Just let me tell you what's going on."

I sigh. She's not going to leave without telling me. Unless I force her. And I'm not going to force her because it would take too much effort.

I take another swig of my ale.

She folds her hands together, but not before I see that her fingers are shaking.

"I'm Riya Trekov, the daughter of Commander Ewing Trekov. Have you heard of him?"

I shake my head. I haven't heard of most people. Among the living, I only care about divers, pilots, and scavengers. Among the dead, I know only the ones whose wrecks would have once made my diving worthwhile. I also knew the ones who had piloted the wrecks I found, as well as the people who sent them, and the politicians, leaders or famous people of their time, their place, their past.

But modern commanders, people whose names I should recognize? I am always at a loss.

"He was the supreme commander in the Colonnade Wars."

Her voice is soft, and it needs to be. The Colonnade Wars aren't popular out here. Most of the spacers sitting in this bar are the children or grandchildren of the losers.

"That was a hundred years ago," I say.

"So you do know the wars." Her shoulders rise up and down in a small sigh. She apparently expected to tell me about them.

"You're awfully young to be the daughter of a supreme commander from those days." I purposely don't say the wars' name. It's better not to rile up the other patrons.

She nods. "I'm a post-loss baby."

It takes me a minute to understand her. At first I thought she meant post-loss of the Colonnade Wars, but then I realize that anyone titled supreme commander in that war had been on the winning side. So she meant loss of something else.

"He's missing?" I ask before I can stop myself.

"He has been for my entire life," she says.

"Was he missing before you were born?"

She takes a deep breath, as if she's considering whether or not she should tell me. Her caution piques my curiosity. For the first time, I'm interested in what she's saying.

"For fifty years," she says quietly.

"Fifty *standard* years?" I ask.

She nods. If I'm guessing her age right, and if she's not lying, then her father went missing before the peace treaties were signed.

"Was he missing in action?" I ask.

She shakes her head.

"A prisoner of war?" Our side—well, the side that populates this part of space, which is only mine by default—didn't give the prisoners back even though that was one of the terms of the treaty.

"That's what we thought," she says.

The "we" is new. I wonder if it means she and her family or she and someone else.

"But?" I ask.

"But I put detectives on the trail years ago, and there's no evidence he was ever captured. No evidence that he met with anyone from the other side," she says with surprising diplomacy. "No evidence that his ship was captured. No evidence that he vanished during the last conflicts of the war, like the official biographies say."



"No real evidence?" I ask. "Or just no evidence that can be found after all this time?"

"No real evidence," she says. "We've looked in the official records and the unofficial ones. I've interviewed some of his crew."

"From the missing vessel," I say.

"That's just it," she says. "His ship isn't missing."

So I frown. She has no reason to approach me. Even in my old capacity, I didn't search for missing humans. I searched for famous ships.

"Then I don't understand," I say.

"We know where he is," she says. "I want to hire you to get him back."

"I don't find people," I say mostly because I don't want to tell her that he's probably not still alive.

No human lives more than 120 years without enhancements. No human who has spent a lot of time in space can survive an implantation of those enhancements.

"I'm not asking you to," she says. "I'm hoping you'll recover him."

"Recover?" She's got my full attention now. "Where is he?"

The tip of her tongue touches her top lip. She's nervous. It's clear she isn't sure she should tell me, even though she wants to hire me.

Finally, she says, "He's in the Room of Lost Souls."

Ask anyone and they'll tell you. The Room of Lost Souls is a myth.

I've only heard it talked about in whispers. An abandoned space station, far from here, far from anything. Most crews avoid it. Those who do stay do so only in an emergency, and even then they don't go deep inside.

Because people who go into the room at the center of the station, what would be, in modern space stations, the control room but which clearly isn't, those people never come out.

Sometimes you can see them, floating around the station or pounding at the windows, crying for help.

Their companions always mount rescue attempts, always lose one or two more people before giving up, and hoping—praying—that what they're seeing isn't real.

Then they make repairs or do whatever it is they had to do when they arrived, and fly off, filled with guilt, filled with remorse, filled with sadness, happy to be the ones who survived.

I've heard that story, told in whispers, since I got to Longbow Station decades ago, and I've never commented. I've never even rolled my eyes or shaken my head.

I understand the need for superstition.

Sometimes its rituals and talismans give us a necessary illusion of safety.

And sometimes it protects us from places that are truly dangerous.

"Why in the known universe would I go there to help you?" I ask, with a little too much edge in my voice.

She studies me. I think I have surprised her. She expected me to tell her that the Room of Lost Souls is a myth, that someone had lied to her, that she is staking her quest on something that has never existed.

"You know it, then." She doesn't sound surprised. Somehow she knows that I've been there. Somehow she knows that I am one of the only people to come out of the Room alive.

I don't answer her question. Instead, I drain my ale and stand. I'm sad to leave the old spacers' bar this early in the day, but I'm going to.

I'm going to leave and walk around the station until I find another bar as grimy as this one.

Then I'm going to go inside and I am, mostly likely, going to get drunk. "You should help me," she says softly, "because I know what the Room is."

I start to get up, but she grabs my arm.

"And I know," she says, "how to get people out."

### *How to get people out.*

The words echo in my head as I walk out of the bar. I stop in that barren corridor and place one hand against the wall, afraid I'm going to be sick.

Voices swirl in my head and I will them away.

Then I take a deep breath and continue on, heading into the less habitable parts of the station, the parts slated for renovation or closure.

I want to be by myself.

I need to.

And I don't want to return to my berth, which suddenly seems too small, or my ship, which suddenly seems too risky.

Instead I walk across ruined floors and through half-gutted walls, past closed businesses and graffiti-covered doorways. It's colder down here—life support is on, but at the minimum provided by regulation—and I almost feel like I'm heading into a wreck, the way I used to head into a wreck when I was a beginner, without thought and without care.

I don't remember much. I remember thinking it looked pretty. Colored lights—pale blues and reds and yellows—extended as far as the eye could see. They twinkled. Around them, only blackness.

My mother held my hand. Her grip was tight through the double layer of our spacesuit gloves. She muttered how beautiful the lights were.

Before the voices started.

Before they built, piling one on top of the other, until—it seemed—we got crushed by the weight.

I don't remember getting out.

I remember my father, cradling me, trying to stop my shaking. I remember him giving orders to someone else to steer the damn ship, get us out of this godforsaken place.

I remember my mother's eyes through her headpiece, reflecting the multi-colored lights, as if she had swallowed a sea of stars.

And I remember her voice, blending with the others, like a soprano joining tenors in the middle of a cantata—a surprise, and yet completely expected.

For years, I heard her voice—strong at first and unusual in its power, then blending, and mixing, until I can't pick it out any longer.

I didn't know if that voice—mixing with other voices—was an aural hallucination, a dream, or a reality. Sometimes I thought it all three.

But it sneaks up on me at the most unexpected moments, sometimes beginning with just a hum. The hum sends shivers down my back, and I do whatever I can to silence the voices.

Which is usually nothing.

Nothing except wait.

After three days, Riya Trekov finds me.

I'm having dinner in Longbow's most exclusive restaurant. The food is exquisite—fresh meat from nearby ports, vegetables grown on the station itself, sauces prepared by the best chef in the sector. There's fresh bread and creamy desserts and real fruit, a rarity no matter what space port you dock on.

The view is exquisite as well—windows everywhere except the floor. If you look up, you see the rest of the station towering above you, lights in some of the guest rooms, decoration in some of the berths. If you look out one set of side windows, you see the docks with the myriad of ships—from tiny single-ships to armored yachts to passenger liners.

Another group of windows show the gardens with their own airlocks and bays, the grow lights sending soft rays across the entire middle of the station.

On this night, I'm having squid in dark chocolate sauce. The squid isn't what Earthers think of as squid, but an ocean-faring creature from one of the nearby planets. It has a salty nutlike taste that the chocolate accents.

I try to focus on the food as Riya sits down. She's carrying a plate and a full glass of wine.

Clearly she had been eating somewhere else in the restaurant, on one of the layers I can't see from my favorite table. But she had seen me come in and somehow, she thinks that gives her permission to join me.

"Have you thought about it?" she asks, as if she made an offer and I said I would consider it.

I can lie and say I hadn't thought about any of it. I can be blunt and say that I want nothing to do with the Room of Lost Souls.

Or I can be truthful and say that her words have played through my head for the last three days. Tempting me. Frightening me.

Intriguing me.

At odd moments, I find myself wondering how I would see the place after all my years of wreck diving, after all the times I've risked my life, after all the hazards I've survived.

"You have," she says with something like triumph.

I continue to eat, but I'm no longer savoring the taste. I almost push my plate away—it's a crime not to taste this squid—but I don't.

I don't want her to see any emotion from me at all.

"But you have questions," she says as if I'm actually taking part in this conversation. "You want to know how I found you."

The hell of it is that I do want to know that. Hardly anyone knows I survived the Room of Lost Souls. I can't say that no one knows because the crew on my father's ship knew. And I have no idea what happened to all of them.

"I have people who can find almost anything," she says.

People. She has people. Which means she's rich.

"If you have people," I say with an emphasis on that phrase, "then have them go to the Room themselves and have them 'recover' your father."

Her cheeks flush. She looks away, but only for a minute. Then she takes a deep breath, as if she needs courage to dive back into this conversation.

"They don't believe that anyone can get out. They think that's as much a myth as the Room itself."

I don't know how I got out. My memory is fluid and try as I might to recover that moment, I can't.

When it becomes clear that I am not going to confirm or deny what happened to me, she says, "Your father is still alive."

I jolt. I had no idea the old man had made it this long.

"Have you ever asked him about the Room?"

I haven't, mostly because I never had the chance. But I don't tell her that. Instead, I say, "You spoke to my father."

She nods. "He's happy to know you're still alive."

I'm not sure I'm happy to know that he is. I prefer to think of myself as a person without a family, a woman without a past.

"Quite honestly," she says, "he's the one who recommended you for this job. I first approached him, but he said he was too old."

I slide my plate to the edge of the table to hide my face as I do the calculations. He turns seventy this year, which is not old at all.

"He also said you have all the skills I need for this job." She hasn't touched her food. "He says he doesn't."

That much is true. He's never gone diving—at least that I know of. He captained a ship, but in the old-fashioned way—not as a hands-on pilot, but as a planetbound owner, who told others what to do.

We were on some kind of pleasure cruise, I think, when my mother and I wandered into the Room. Or maybe we were moving from one system to another.

I honestly don't know. I don't remember and I never asked him.

He wasn't around much anyway. After Mother vanished into that Room, he dumped me with my maternal grandparents and went in search of the very thing Riya claims she found: a way to recover people from the Room of Lost Souls.

"It makes no sense that he has refused to help you," I say as a bus tray arrives, sends out a small metal arm that sweeps my plate into its interior, and then floats away. "He's always wanted a way into the Room."

"He says the problem is not the way in, but the way out." She finally picks up her fork and picks at her now-cold food.

A chill runs through me. Does my father speak with that kind of authority because he has sent people in after my mother? Or because he's thinking of what happened to us all those years ago?

"And yet you claim you have that way out."

A serving tray appears with an ice cream glass filled with red and black berries separated by layers of cream. My coffee steams beside it. My standing order. I shouldn't take it, but I do.

"I do have a way out," she says.

"But you can't find anyone stupid enough to test it," I say.

She lets out a small laugh. "Is that what you think? You think I need a test subject?"

I take a sip of my coffee. It's slightly bitter, like all coffee on Longbow Station. Somehow the beans grown here lack the richness I've found on other stations.

"The way out has been tested. Going in and returning is no longer an issue. What I need is someone with enough acumen to bring out my father."

Something in her tone reaches me. It's a hint of frustration, a bit of anger.

Her people have failed her. Which is why she's coming to me.

"You've done this before," I say.

She nods. "Six times. Everyone survived. Everyone is healthy. There are no residual problems."

"Except they can't find your father."

"Oh," she says. "They have found him. They just can't recover him."

Now I am intrigued. "Why not?"

"Because," she says, "they can't convince him to leave."

I take a bite of the berries and cream. I need a few moments to think about this. I still feel as if she's conning me, but I'm not sure how. Or why she would do so.

"Why did he leave?" I ask.

She blinks at me in surprise. She clearly didn't expect curiosity from me.

"Leave?"

"You said he didn't show up for the treaty signings. That he essentially missed the end of the war. Why?"

She frowns just enough so that I realize she's never considered this question. She's been looking at her father as someone—*something*—she lost, not as a person in his own right. Oh, he has history, but it's history without her, and therefore not relevant.

"No one knows," she says.

Someone always knows. And if that someone is no longer alive, the answer would probably be in the records. Something this modern is easy to trace; it's the old stuff, like the Dignity Vessels, whose histories got so lost to time that they are difficult to figure out.

She's finally hooked me and she probably doesn't even know how. I don't want to return to the Room for my mother—I barely remember her and what I do remember is vague. I don't even want to return to face my own past.

I want to solve this mystery she has unwittingly presented me with. I want to know why a famous man, a man who won some of the most important battles of an important war, disappears before the war ends, and winds up in a place he knew better than to approach.

For the first time in years, the historian in me, the *diver* in me senses a challenge. Not like the old challenges, the ones that cost me so many friends and colleagues.

But a new challenge, one that will threaten me alone.

One that has the risk I miss combined with the historical mysteries that I love.

I try not to let my sudden enthusiasm show. I ask, as coldly as I can, "What are you paying?"

Her eyes light up. She seems surprised. Maybe she thought she'd never catch me. Maybe I am her last hope.

She names a figure. It's astoundingly high.

Still, I say, "Triple it and I'll consider the job."

"If you can get him out," she says, her voice breathless with excitement, "I'll give you one hundred times that much."

Now I'm feeling breathless. That's more money than I've earned in two decades.

But I don't have a use for the money I have. I can't imagine what I'd do with a sum that large.

Still, I negotiate because that too is in my blood. "I want it all up front."

"Half," she says. "And half when you recover him."

That's fair. Half would provide me a berth at Longbow and all of my expenses for the rest of my life. I'd never have to touch the rest of my money, the stuff I earned these past few years.

"Half up front," I say, agreeing, "and half when I recover him—only if you pay all expenses for the entire investigation and journey."

"Investigation?" She frowns, as if she doesn't like the word.

I nod. "Before I go after him, I need to know who he is."

"I told you—"

"I need to know *him*, not his reputation."

Her frown grows. "Why?"

"Because," I say, "in all the hundreds of theories about that Room, only one addresses the souls trapped inside."

"So?"

"So haven't you wondered how a man like your father got lost in there?"

I can tell from her expression that she hasn't considered that at all.

"Or why the name of the place—in all known languages—is the Room of Lost Souls. Are the souls lost because they entered? Or were they lost before they opened the door?"

She shifts slightly in her chair. She doesn't like what I'm saying.

"You've thought of this before," she says.

"Of course I have." I keep my voice down.

She nods. "You think he was lost before he went in?"

"I have no idea," I say, "but I plan to find out."

By the time I arrive at my berth, the money is in my account. That surprises me. I thought, after our conversation, that Riya would back out. She doesn't want to know her father as a human being. She wants only the image of him that she built up through her lonely childhood. The war hero who vanished. The strong man who got trapped.

Not a sad survivor who might have gotten lost long before he opened a door into a forbidden place.

Still, she has paid me and she has given me free rein.

I sit at the built-in desk and move the money to all of my accounts. I'm



going to have to create some new ones before I leave so that my holdings are diversified. Before I do that, I pay for this berth for the next five years.

I had warned Riya that the recovery could take a long time. She wanted it done right. After I heard her tales of the previous attempts, I knew that part of the problem was she'd hired thieves and ruffians and risk-takers who specialized in cross-system possession recovery.

She'd hired disposable people who usually committed snatch-and-grabs. People who didn't care much for her mission or their own lives.

People who wouldn't be missed.

In that, they were a lot like me.

Riya and I had finished the negotiations as I drank my coffee. She showed me the device her people had used to get out of the Room. I examined it. It looked unusual enough.

But she wouldn't give me its specs until I was ready to go to the Room.

I was fine with that. It gave both of us an illusion of control—me, the ability to say I was done before I went into the Room; and her, the belief that I had no idea how to use what she had shown me.

We'd made a verbal record of our negotiations. Both of our attorneys would work together to make a formal agreement that we would sign within the month.

She seemed nervous and uncertain, while I was nervous and happy. If someone had asked me before we'd started the negotiations who would feel what, I would have said that I'd be the uncertain one while she would be happy with all that we'd done.

I'd fully expected her to terminate before I arrived in my berth.

Instead she paid me.

I finish transferring the money. I contact and pay my attorney, notifying her of her obligations in drafting this agreement.

Then I lean back in my chair.

For the first time since I've come to Longbow Station, balancing my chair on two legs does not satisfy me. The berth—with its built-in desk, view of the grow pods, and slide-out soft bed—no longer feels like home.

I need to move. I need to get out of here.

I need to spend the night on my ship.

By modern standards, *Nobody's Business* is a small ship, but by mine, it's huge. The *Business* can fly with a single pilot, but it's designed for twenty to fifty people.

When I was wreck diving, I'd fly with ten or less and to me, that felt crowded. I'd close off the lower levels and lock up the cargo bays.

Sometimes I forget all the space I'm not using. The main level has the bridge and auxiliary controls. It also has the lounge, where I've put most of my viewing technology so that I can review dives. There are six cabins on this level as well, including mine.

The captain's cabin is two levels up. I never use it. My cabin is the same size as all the others. It looks the same as well, except for the hard-wired terminal that I use when I don't want anyone hacking into my work.

Most (but not all) of the other systems on the *Business* are networked, and I'm up front with any crew that I hire that I watch the systems dili-

gently. If they put something on the system from a virus to a piece of information, it's mine. I've learned a lot that way.

The *Business* is docked in the permanent section of the station. I pay extra to keep her systems disconnected from the station's systems. I also bribe the officials to keep an eye on her, to make sure no one enters illegally.

Even so, I still run several security programs—all of them redundant. No one, not even the best hacker, can shut off all of them and still have time to case my ship.

So as I enter the *Business*, I stand in the airlock and check the first layer of security, seeing who—if anyone—has crossed this threshold since I last went through.

According to the programs, no one has.

I let myself in, breathing the stale air. I keep the environmental systems on low when I'm stationbound—no sense wasting the energy. I power up, check more redundant security systems, and run a full diagnostic which I network to my own internal computer.

Long ago, I set up the *Business* and my single ship to communicate with me—mostly to make sure I remain awake and alert when I'm piloting either ship. But I also use the links to communicate with the *Business* about internal matters, so that I'm not tied to the bridge.

The air has become cool as the environmental systems kick in. My cabin still smells faintly of incense from an abortive and mistaken attempt at relaxation on the last trip full of tourists. I make a mental note to have this room cleaned top to bottom, and then I sit at the hardwired terminal.

It's covered with a faint layer of dust. I haven't touched it in more than a year. I'm not even sure it'll power up.

But it does. Then it runs its own diagnostics and shows me all the security video from the cabin itself. I let the video play in a corner of the touchscreen while I access my financials.

I move 90 percent of the money that Riya paid me from my public accounts to my private ones. In a day or so, I'll create some new accounts, and divide the money up even more.

Then I settle into my chair and order lunch from my personal store.

I'm going to be here for a while. I have a lot of research to do and I don't want it traced.

I start with the Colonnade Wars.

I learned long ago to research everything, especially something you're certain of, because the memory plays tricks. And something you're certain of is most likely to be the thing you'll get wrong.

The Colonnade Wars lasted nearly one hundred years. The wars began as a series of skirmishes on the far end of this sector. Then actual war broke out toward the other end, on a small planet that had been colonized so long that some believed the humans on that planet actually evolved there.

Other battles—with different participants—started throughout the sector. At first, the weapons brokers and the mercenaries seemed to be the only ones who knew about the various skirmishes, but then it became clear that powerbrokers from several nation states were financing their

favorites in each conflict. And sometimes those powerbrokers backed both factions at the same time.

The battle turned away from the petty internal squabbles—over land, over entitlements, over religious shrines—and turned against those who funded the fights.

Suddenly the powerful found themselves fighting on several fronts. Their massive armies and huge weapon systems were no match to the smaller, more creative warfare of their enemies.

And it looked, for a long time, as if the massive armies would break.

Enter Commander Ewing Trekov and his cohorts. All of them had been injured on one front or another. Most of them had come within a heartbeat of dying.

They ended up at the same treatment facility in the very center of the sector, and there they realized they had the same philosophy about the wars.

First, they believed that the Colonnade Wars were not wars at all, but a single war—a large, scattered battlefield that spread across several systems. These men and women, brilliant all, realized that fighting each front as if it were a separate war was what was destroying the army. A military could have no coherent strategy when it believed it was fighting a dozen wars at once.

So these people, as they healed, began studying the history of warfare—not just in this sector, but throughout human history, as far back as they could go. They discussed superweapons and supertroops. They discussed a unified front and a robotized military. They explored remote fighting versus hands-on.

And they realized that nothing—no discovery, no miracle weapon, no well-equipped soldier—had ever taken the place of living commanders with a broad and unified vision.

And sometimes that vision was as simple as this: *Annihilate the enemy wherever you find him, whoever he might be.*

According to the histories, the man who first articulated that simple vision in the Colonnade Wars was Commander Ewing Trekov. Whether or not that's true is another matter.

What is true—and verifiable—is that Commander Trekov was the most effective leader of the war. He destroyed more enemy strongholds, captured more ships, and killed more soldiers—from all sides—than any other commander in the war.

He was supposed to be at the victory celebration. More importantly, he was supposed to be at the treaty signing ceremony. There wasn't just one treaty to be signed, but dozens—all with various governments (or, as one observer more accurately called them, various survivors). Trekov's presence wasn't just symbolic. He had negotiated several of the treaties himself.

Slowly I realize that I could spend the rest of my life reading about the Colonnade Wars and not get to all the details.

But those details didn't concern me. All that concerned me was Commander Trekov.

And he was there but not there. Mentioned but not quoted. Observed but not really seen.

So I look up Trekov himself—when he was born, where he went to school, where he got his training. I look for family information—both on his family of origin and on the family he left behind.

I find Riya Trekov. She's significantly younger than I thought—born to Trekov's childless fifth wife nearly six decades after his disappearance. The other children want nothing to do with Riya—they believe her to be illegitimate, even though her DNA, her provenance (so to speak), is probably surer than theirs.

She has an easily accessible history—with degrees in accounting and business, a long career in high finance, and a personal wealth that's almost legendary. She accumulated those funds on her own, and is known around the sector as one of the most intuitive investors around.

Now she's invested in me—the first whim I could find in her entire history—and I wonder if this investment will pay off.

It's certainly turning into a research nightmare on my end.

Because the back-story on Ewing Trekov is confusing. His origins seem lost in time. His education is classified, as is most of his military experience. His battles are well documented, but that's about all of his life that's well documented.

In the official histories, Trekov's personal history is deliberately vague. Which makes me wonder what's hidden there, and why no one is supposed to know.

For a while, I pace around the main level, trying to figure out how to discover the man and not the myth. And then I realize I'm researching him wrong.

I need to approach him as if he were a ship, a wreck I'm trying to discover.

I need to go backward—from the last known sighting—and then I need to dig in the unofficial records, the half-hidden reports, and the highlights of his personal past.

Within forty-eight hours, my ship is stocked, my meager belongings on board, and I am heading to a little-known military outpost at what once was the edge of the sector.

The last recorded place anyone saw Ewing Trekov alive.

By all rights, this little outpost should be famous. It is not only the last place Ewing Trekov was seen alive, but it is also the place that he and the other commanders planned their strategy.

Military outposts are security minded. They make places like Longbow Station seem lawless. So I've come with letters of introduction from a general whom I supervised on tourist dives, a colonel who has known me since I began my career, and a government official who testifies to the fact that my research is never for public purposes, only to find important "historical information."

I also have a letter of explanation from Riya Trekov, giving me permission to look into her family's confidential files. I have no idea if such a letter will open doors for me—I have never researched a human subject before—but I figure such a letter can't hurt.

This outpost is top of the line. The materials in the public areas are new and smell faintly of recently assembled metal. The lighting is set

higher than any I've seen in a commercial outpost and the environmental systems are running at maximum comfort.

My tax dollars keep these soldiers in relative luxury, at least for spacefarers. Most off-duty personnel walk around in shirt-sleeves and thin pants. Anyone on Longbow wearing such flimsy clothing would freeze.

I am given a bracelet that opens doors to the sections of the outpost I'm allowed in. I've been given a guest suite—they don't call civilian quarters berths here—and with the suite comes the suggestion that I use it instead of staying shipside.

The suite is larger than the captain's cabins on most luxury yachts. It doesn't take me long to find out that I'm in one of the VIP rooms, courtesy, it seems, of my ties with the general. His letter, which I scan after I look at my quarters, asks that the military treat me like one of their own.

Apparently they take that to mean they should treat me as they would treat him.

My rooms—and I have five of them—all have a view of the concentric rings, as well as a private kitchen (along with a personal chef should I not want cafeteria food), a valet should I require it, and a daily cleaning service. I don't require a valet or room cleaning service (although I know they won't waive that entirely), and I stress, at every opportunity, how much I value my privacy.

My in-room computer system can access the public library of the base, and I start there, sitting on one of the most comfortable chairs I've ever used in my life, and scrolling through list upon list of recorded information pertaining to Commander Trekov himself.

It takes me nearly three days, but I finally find visual and audio files of his arrival on the base. No holographic files, at least not yet. But the visual and audio ones are the first I've found of the Commander at all.

He's imposing, nearly six-seven, which is tall for someone who spent his life in ships. His walk marks him as planet-raised as well, as do his thick bones and well-defined muscles.

He's not a handsome man, although he might have been once. His face is care-lined and his eyes are sad. His hair is cut short—regulation then as now—and he has a fastidiousness that seems extreme even in this military environment.

I freeze one of the images of his face and frame it. Then I set it, as a holopicture, on the tabletop near my work station. I used to do this with ships that I was searching for. Ships that had disappeared or whose wrecks existed somewhere in a grid that no one had bothered searching for decades.

The images are always of the ships when they were new. I used to compare that image with the wreck when I found it, not to find my way around it but so that I could get a sense of what hopes were lost in the ship's ultimate destruction.

But the image I keep of Ewing Trekov isn't of his youth, but of what he looked like toward the end. It's an acknowledgement that I'm searching for the part of him that's left over, the skeleton, the frame, the bits and pieces that survived.

I am no closer to getting him out of that Room by staring at his image

than I got close to a wreck by staring at the original image of a ship. But I feel closer. I feel like this image holds something important, something I'm missing.

Or maybe, something I'm not yet allowed to see.

There are actually people on the outpost who remember Ewing Trekov. They're old now, but most of them still work in their respective departments.

All of them are willing to talk with me and after days of interviews, only one medical officer seems to have a story that I can't find in the records.

Her name is Nola Batinet. She wants to meet in the officers' mess.

The mess isn't a dining hall, like the mess for regular soldiers. The officers' mess is divided into six different restaurants, each with its own entrance off the central bar. People in uniform fill that bar. They all have an air of authority.

A tiny woman stands near a real potted plant. The plant is taller than I am, probably taller than Trekov was. It's bright green, has broad leaves, and smells strongly of mint.

The woman is so small she could hide among the leaves.

As I approach, she holds out a small hand, which I take gently in greeting. The bones are as fragile as I feared. I'm careful not to squeeze at all, afraid I'll break her.

"We have a reservation in Number Four," she says.

Apparently the six restaurants here have no names. They go by number.

Number Four is dark and smells of garlic. There are no free-standing tables, just built-in booths with backs so high you can't see the other diners.

A serving unit—a simple holographic menu with audio capabilities—whisks us to the nearest booth. At first, I figure that the unit does so with each customer. Then I realize it's addressing Nola Batinet by name and has reassured her that they never let her favorite booth go when there's the possibility that she will come into the mess.

She thanks it as if it were human, nods when it asks if she wants the usual, and then she turns to me. I haven't even looked over the menu yet, but I'm not really here for the food. I take whatever it is she's having, order some coffee and some water, and wait until the server unit floats away.

"So," she says, "Ewing Trekov. I knew him well."

A faint smile crosses her face as she thinks of him. Her memories—at least the one she's lost in—are clearly pleasant.

A tray floats over with our beverages and with a large plate of cheeses and meats. I've never seen so many different kinds. The meats are clearly manufactured and are composed of so many different colors that I'm hesitant at first.

But Nola has been eating here for decades and seems no worse for it. After she eats a few pieces, I try one. The meat is peppery and filled with the garlic I've been smelling. It's remarkably good.

"You're working for his daughter, right?" Nola asks. "The created one."

"She wants me to recover her father," I say, even though I've told Nola this when I first contacted her through the outpost networks. "She thinks he's in the Room of Lost Souls."



Nola nods just enough to confuse me. That tiny movement could mean she knows he's in the Room or that she has heard of this daughter's whim before. Or it could simply be an acknowledgement of what I have to say.

"Why does she want him?" Nola asks. "She never knew him."

And I had neglected to ask that question. Or maybe it wasn't neglect at all. If I knew, I wouldn't have taken the job, and the job had—in the end—intrigued me.

"It's not my concern," I say. "I'm just supposed to find him."

"You won't find him," Nola says. "He's long gone."

"How did you know him?" I ask, trying to get the conversation away from my job and back to her.

That small smile has returned. "The way most women knew him."

"You were lovers."

She nods. For a moment, her gaze rests somewhere to the left of me, and I know she's not seeing me or the booth or any part of Number Four. She's lost in the past with Ewing Trekov.

"You make it sound like he had a lot of lovers," I say.

Her eyes focus and move toward me. When they rest on me, they hold a bit of contempt. She knows what I'm doing, and she doesn't like it. She wants to control this conversation.

"A lot of lovers," she says, "a lot of wives, and more children than he could keep track of."

Maybe that's where the disapproval comes from. Riya Trekov isn't special in Nola's eyes.

"He didn't care about family?" I ask.

Nola shrugs. "The man I knew didn't have time for relationships. Not long ones, anyway. His entire life was about the wars and the entire sector. He saw lives the way we see stars—something far away and yet precious. Individual lives meant something to him only for a few weeks. Then he moved on."

There's pain in her voice.

"He moved on from you," I say as I take some yellow cheese. It's slimy against my fingers, but I don't dare put it back.

"Of course he did. Anyone who believed he would do otherwise was a fool."

But the bitter twist on the word "fool" makes it clear to me who "anyone" was.

"You said that you know things no one else does." I make myself eat the slimy cheese. It's delicious. Rich and sharp, a taste that goes well with the pepper and garlic of the meat.

"Of course I do," she says. "And some of it will go with me to my own death."

It's my turn to nod. I understand that kind of privacy.

She sets the plate near the edge of the table. Something moving so fast that I can barely see it whisks the plate away.

"But the story I'm going to tell you," she says, "isn't one of those. And it's not something you'll find in the histories either."

I wait.

"It's about his plans," she says with that secret smile. "He never

planned to go to any of the ceremonies, and he wasn't going to sign any treaties."

"He told you this?" I ask, mostly because she's surprised me. Everything I've seen says he fully intended to go to the ceremonies. He sent notice as to when his ship would arrive. He had a contingent of honor guards waiting for him on another outpost nearer to the ceremony. He even had a dress uniform ordered specially for the occasion.

"No, he didn't tell me anything," she says. "At least, not in so many words. He wasn't that kind of man. I figured it out, years later."

She figured it out when she remembered what happened that last day. How he'd been, how sad he'd seemed.

They met in his VIP cabin. It was large and lovely, with a bed the size of her quarters. But he wasn't interested in sex, although they had some.

He ordered food for them—an astonishing meal for a place this remote. Yet he didn't enjoy the meal. He picked at it, letting much of it go to waste. She couldn't—she hadn't had a meal this good since she'd been stationed here.

But he waited until she was finished before he spoke.

"How do you do it?" he asked. "How do you save lives when you know they'll just go to waste?"

She didn't understand what he meant. "Go to waste?"

"Most of your patients here, they'll get sent back out and they'll die out there. Or they'll go home and they won't be the same. Their families will no longer know them. Their lives will be different."

"But not wasted," she said.

He kept picking at the food. He wouldn't look at her. "How do you know?"

"How do you?" she asked.

He shrugged.

"Most of these soldiers I see, they're children," she said. "They'll go home and remake their lives."

He shrugged again. "What about career military?"

She set her own fork down and pushed her plate away. She realized then she had to pay attention to this conversation, that it seemed to be about one thing and was really about another.

"Are you worried about what'll happen to you after the ceremonies?" she asked.

He shook his head, but he still didn't look up. He was developing a bald spot near his crown, and he hadn't paid for enhancements. The small circle of skin made him seem vulnerable in a way she'd never noticed before.

"This isn't about me," he said, but she didn't believe him.

"You can stay in the military," she said. "They need planners. Even in peacetime, they'll need a standing army. Governments always do."

"Seriously, Nola," he said with some irritation. "It's not about me."

"What is it about then?" she asked.

He shook his head again. The movement was small, almost involuntary, as if he were speaking to himself instead of her.

"Your units? The people under your command?"

He kept shaking his head.

"Your injured?"

"The dead," he said softly.

She was silent for a long time, hoping he would elaborate. But he didn't. So she struggled to understand.

"We can't help them," she said. "Even now with the technology that we have, the knowledge that we have, we can't help them. We just try to prevent death."

"And how do you do that?" he asked, raising his head. "How do you know who's worthy?"

She frowned. She was a doctor. She had been one all of her adult life. "I don't choose the worthy ones. That's not my decision."

"I've seen triage," he said. "You pick. You always pick."

Her breath caught.

"I don't choose by worthiness," she said softly. "I choose by my skill level. I choose by time. Who will survive the intervention? Who will take the least amount of time so that I can get to other injured? Who will be the least amount of work?"

That last made her face flush. She'd never admitted it to someone else before—at least not to someone who wasn't a doctor, someone who wasn't really faced with those decisions.

"That's how you pick who's worthy," he said.

His words made her flush deepen.

"Doesn't that bother you? Don't you look at the ones you didn't even try to save, the ones you sacrificed for the others, and wonder about them? Don't you sometimes think you made the wrong choice?"

Her face was so warm now that it actually hurt.

"No." She wanted to say that with confidence, but her voice was small, smaller than she'd ever heard it around him. "If I thought I always made the wrong choice, I couldn't do my job."

"But in the wee hours, when you're alone. . .?"

She was staring at him. He hadn't looked up once.

After a moment, he shook his head a third time, as if he were arguing with himself.

"Never mind," he said. "I'm just tired."

Which gave her an excuse to leave.

She had no sense that it was the last time she'd see him. The next day, he had left the outpost.

And she never heard from him again.

"I'm sorry," I say after giving her a moment to return from the memory. "I don't see how all of that meant he didn't plan to go to the ceremony. I don't see how this relates to the Room of Lost Souls."

She raises her eyebrows in surprise. I get the distinct feeling she has just decided I'm dumb.

"He wasn't thinking about the future," she says. "He was thinking about the past."

"I got that," I say, and hope the words aren't too defensive. "But he makes no mention of the ceremonies or of the Room. So I'm not sure how you made the connection all these years later."

A slight frown creases the bridge of her nose. "The Room," she says, "is a pilgrimage. Some say it's a sacred place. Others believe only the damned can visit it."

My breath catches. I haven't heard any of that before. Or maybe I have. I used to make it a practice not to listen to stories about the Room because I believed no one could understand that place if they hadn't been there.

"All right," I say, "let's assume he knew that. How do you know he went there next?"

"His crew says so." She crosses her arms.

"I know that," I say. "But you found this interchange important. Enlighten me. Why?"

"Because I was stupid," she snaps. "He wasn't talking about me. He was talking about himself. *His* choices. *His* way of doing things. *His* losses. I'm sure he was reflecting on them because everyone expected him to celebrate the end of the Wars."

"He should have celebrated," I say.

She smiles faintly, then nods. For a moment she looks away. I can see her make a decision. She takes a deep breath and uncrosses her arms.

"I agreed with you back then. I figured he should have been at his happiest. But he wasn't so wrong about our jobs. I spent a lot of years as the chief surgeon on a military ship, and mostly I handled minor injuries and not-so-serious illness. But when we were in the middle of a battle, and the wounded kept pouring in, I just reacted."

I nod, not wanting her to stop.

"I worked my ass off," she says. "And people died."

She leans back, and rests her wrist on the side of the table. "I never, ever counted how many people I saved. I still don't. I suppose I could look it up. But I know to the person how many have died under my watch," she says softly. "I'll wager Ewing knew too. And each one of those deaths, they take something from you."

*A little piece of yourself*, I almost add. But I don't want her to think I'm sympathizing falsely, and I'm not willing to reveal as much of myself to her as she has revealed of herself to me.

"He wouldn't have been talking about death if he was going to go to those ceremonies," she says. "He wouldn't have been looking at the past. He would have been looking toward the future, at what we could build."

She sounds so confident. Yet they were just lovers, in passing, on a military output. How well did she really know him, after all?

And how can I ask her that without insulting her further?

So I try a different tack, partly to take my mind off those irritating questions and partly because I want to know.

"You said it's a pilgrimage. You said only the damned can get in."

Her frown grows. "Have you never heard of the Room?"

"I know it," I say, choosing my words carefully. "I just don't know the legends."

And I should. I used to believe that legends were more important than "facts" or histories or stories I could verify. Because legends held a bit of truth.

"Do the damned go to get cleansed?" I ask.

Her mouth closes. She takes a breath, sighs, then gives me that faint smile all over again.

"Some say the Room bestows forgiveness on those who deserve it." That faraway look appears in her eyes.

"And those who don't?" I ask.

Tears well. She doesn't brush at them, doesn't even seem to notice them.

"They never come back," she says. Then she frowns at me. "Perhaps he went for forgiveness, not to disappear."

I shrug. "The timing works. If he completed his pilgrimage to the Room, he could have gone to the treaty-signing ceremonies."

"With a pure heart," she whispers.

"He was a hero," I say without a trace of irony. "Didn't he have one already?"

And for the first time, she has no answer for me.

She has led me in a whole new direction. I'm not looking for the remains of a man. I'm looking for something unusual, something special.

A man has a history and occasionally he becomes a legend. But a man is rarely special by himself. Sometimes he becomes special in a special time. Sometimes he rises beyond his upbringing to become something new. Sometimes he starts a movement, or alters the course of a country.

And sometimes—rarely—he changes an entire sector.

The way Ewing Trekov supposedly did with his friends as they developed a plan for the war.

But that story implies that he didn't work alone. That if he had died before he came to this outpost, someone else would have picked up that mantle. That someone might not have performed as well. He—or she—might have done better. There's no way to know.

But like all humans, Trekov wasn't entirely unique.

The Room of Lost Souls is unique.

No one knows exactly what it is or how it got to be. No one knows where it started or who built it or why.

Places develop myths, become legends in ways more powerful than any human being ever can. Because beneath each legendary human is the reminder that he *is* human, that what makes him special is how he rose above his humanness to become a little bit more than the rest of us.

Not a lot more. Just a little bit.

Trekov was a man who had more children than he could count, who made love to women but apparently didn't love them. A man who cared more about his work than his family.

A man like so many others.

A man who just happened to be the right man for the war he found himself in.

But the Room—the Room existed before humans settled this sector. The Room shows up in the earliest documents from the earliest space travelers.

And because it's so old, and because no one knows exactly how it works or why it's here or how it came to be, myths grew up around it.

People go on a pilgrimage.  
Smart people, like Ewing Trekov.

People believe the Room will do something for them. Change something about them. Satisfy something within them.

The legends around the Room are fraught with danger. Space travelers are warned to stay away from it. I remember that much.

I'd *heard* that much.

But I'm not sure when. Or where. Or from whom.

Still, I need to heed my own advice.

I need to research the thing I think I know the best.

I need to talk to the one other person who remembers it vividly.

I have to talk to my own father.

Much as I don't want to.

He lives halfway across the sector, on a small planet whose only inhabited continent counts itself as one of the losers in the Colonnade Wars.

He's lived there for nearly two decades—and it's a sign of how out of touch we are that I actually had to look that information up.

My father's house is a maze of glass, stairs, and steel. From the outside it seems haphazard, rooms on top of rooms, but from the inside, it has a wide-open feel, like the best cruise liners, designed not to take you to a destination but to help you enjoy the journey.

He built his house in the center of a large blue lake, so at night the water reflects the skies above. If those skies are clear, it seems like he is in space, traveling from one port to another.

He doesn't seem surprised to see me. If anything, he's a little relieved.

I arrive in the middle of the afternoon and he insists I stay there. I nearly decline until he shows me the guest room. It is at the very top of the house, glass on all sides except the part of the floor that covers the room below. The bed seems to free-float between the blueness of the lake and the blueness of the sky.

The sun—too close to this planet for my tastes—sends light through the glass, but environmental controls keep the room cool and comfortable. My father shows me where those controls are so I can lessen the gravity if I want.

It takes me a while to realize that my father's house is modeled on the station that houses the Room of Lost Souls. We meet in the center room—the room that would be the Room of Lost Souls if we were on that station—and he offers me a meal.

I decline. I'm too nervous in his presence to eat anything.

My father is no longer the man I remember, the man who cradled me when I got out of that Room. That man had been in his late thirties, tall and strong and powerful. He'd loved his wife and his daughter, making us the center of his life.

He'd commanded ships, built an empire of wealth, and still had time for us.

He abandoned everything to figure out how to get my mother out of that place. His businesses, his friends.

Me.



Which makes it so strange to see him now, essentially idle, in this place of openness and reflected light.

He still looks strong, but he hasn't bothered with enhancements. His face has lines—sadness lines that turn down his eyes, and pinch the corners of his mouth. He has let his hair go completely white, along with his eyebrows, which have become bushy. His mustache—something I considered as much a part of him as his hands—is long gone.

He makes our greeting awkward by trying to hug me. I won't let him.

He acts like he still has affection for me. He does make it clear that he has followed my career—as much as he can through what little I make public.

But he has respected my wishes—the wishes I screamed at him the last time I ran away from my grandparents—and has stayed out of my life.

"You sent Riya Trekov to me," I say.

I can't sit in the chair he's offered. I'm too restless in his presence, so I pace in the large room. The glass here opens onto the other rooms. Through their glass walls I can see still more rooms, and at the very end, the lake. Looking at it through all this glass makes it seem far away, and not real. It looks like a holograph of a lake, the kind you'd see on the distance ships of my childhood.

"I figured if anyone could help her, you could." His voice is the same, deep and warm and just a little nasal.

I shake my head. "You're the one who has done all the research on the Room."

"But you're the one who has dived the most dangerous wrecks ever found."

I turn toward him then. He sits in the very center of the room. His chair is made of frosted glass and the cushions that protect his skin are a matching white. He looks like he has risen from the floor—a creature of glass and sunlight.

"You think this is like a wreck?" I ask. "Wrecks are known. They're filled with space and emptiness. They have corners and edges and debris, but they're part of this universe."

"You think the Room isn't?" He folds his hands and rests his chin on his knuckles.

"I don't know what it is. You're the one who has spent his life studying the damn thing."

So much for trying to hide my bitterness toward his choices.

He grimaces, but nods, an acknowledgement that my bitterness has its reasons.

"Yes," he says. "I've studied it. I've traveled to it countless times. I've sent people in there. I've repeated the same experiments that have been tried since it was discovered. None of them work."

"So why do you think Riya Trekov's device will work?" I ask.

"Because I was with her on one of the missions," he says. "I watched people she paid go in and come back out."

"Empty-handed," I say.

He nods.

"Yet she thinks someone can bring her father out."

"She might be right," he says.

"And if he can come out, so can Mother."

"Yes." The word is soft. He lifts his chin off his folded hands. The knuckles have turned white.

"If you believe this and you think I'm the one who can bring a lost soul out, how come you didn't ask me to do this yourself?"

"I did," he says. "You turned me down."

I snort and finally sink into one of the nearby chairs. He's right; he did contact me. I had forgotten it among his many summonses, all of which I ignored. But this one had been his last, a long plea explaining that he not only had a way into the Room of Lost Souls, he had a way to survive it.

"You used to say you never wanted me to go back in there. You discouraged me from even going near the place, remember?"

I had been fifteen and full of myself. I'd run away from my grandparents half a dozen times. They were in constant mourning for my mother, and believed I was no substitute. It was pretty clear that they blamed me for her loss.

The final time, my father came after me, and I told him I could get my mother. I was the only one who'd come out alive. He owed me the chance to try.

He had refused.

I left him—and my grandparents—and never contacted any of them again. Although he kept trying to reach me. And I kept glancing at, then refusing, his messages.

"I couldn't risk it," he says. "We barely got you out that first time."

"Yet you recommend me to go in when Riya Trekov comes to call. Because she has a way out or because you don't care any more?"

His cheeks flush. "You didn't have to agree."

The chair is softer than I expect. I relax into it. "I know," I say, giving him that much. "Her plea interested me."

"Because of your diving," he says.

I shake my head. *Because I have nothing left.* But I don't say that.

"I recommended you because you're trained now," he says. "Of everyone I know, you have a chance, not just to get out. But to get out with something. You've become an amazing woman."

I no longer know him. I can't tell if he's being sincere or if he's trying to convince me.

He's still a man obsessed. I wonder what he'll do if he recovers the remnants of Mother. Her "soul" or her memory or even her self. He's lived for decades without her. If she's still alive, she's spent double her initial lifespan inside a single Room.

I came here to find out one thing. So rather than debate the merits of my experience or the point of his obsession, I say, "Tell me what happened. How did we end up at the Room? How did we lose Mother?"

"You don't remember?" he asks.

The lights, the voices. I remember. Just not in any detail.

"My memories are a child's memories," I say. "I want the real story. The adult story. Mistakes and all."

We had no home. I didn't remember that, just like I didn't remember moving onto the ship six months before. My parents had sold our house and had put everything they had into his business, a fleet of cargo ships that ran all over the sector.

The business had become a success when my father stopped caring about the ethics of the cargo he carried. Sometimes he brought food or agricultural supplies to far-flung outposts. Sometimes he brought weapons to splinter groups rebelling against various governments.

He didn't care, so long as he got his payment.

He made so much money, he no longer needed to run the fleet, but he did. Still, my mother begged him to buy land and he did that too. This land, kilometers and kilometers of it, the entire lake and the surrounding greenery.

He promised her they would retire here.

But they were still young, and he loved travel. He commanded the lead vessel because he owned it, not because he was good at piloting or even at leadership.

He tells me about the trips, about the deliveries, about the crew. The ship had a contingent of forty regulars, with two dozen others whom he'd hired for larger jobs. Sometimes they worked the cargo, sometimes they repaired the ship. Always they listened to him, whether he was right or not.

But he wasn't the one who commanded them to the Room of Lost Souls. That was my mother. She had heard about it, studied it, thought about it.

She wanted to see it.

She didn't believe a place that old—human-made—could exist in this part of space.

"She was trying to be a tourist," he says now. "Trying to make all this travel work."

But I wonder. Just like I wondered about Trekov. If my mother had done all the studying, had she been planning a pilgrimage? Because of my father's business or because of some problem all her own?

I realize, as I'm sitting there, I know even less about her than I know about my father. I only know what I remember, what her parents told me in their grief, and what my father is telling me now.

"I took her there," he says. "With no thought, no study. I thought it was just an ancient relic, a place that we could see in half a day and be gone."

"Half a day," I mutter.

He looks at me, clearly startled that I spoke.

"So she planned to go to the Room?"

"That was the point of our visit," he says.

"And she wanted to take me?" I can't believe anyone who studied that place would bring a child to it.

"You suited up and followed her. You grabbed her hand as she went through that door. I think you were trying to keep her from going inside."

But I wasn't. I was entranced with the lights, as fascinated as she had been.

"I saw you go in," he says. "I called to you both, but the door closed behind you."

"And then?" I ask.

"And then I couldn't get you out."

Minutes became hours. Hours became a day. He tried everything short of going in himself. He smashed at the window, tried to dismantle the walls, sent in some kind of grappler to grab us. Nothing worked.

"Then, one day, the door opened." His voice still holds a kind of awe. "And there you stood, your hands over your ears. I grabbed you and pulled you out, and held you, and the door closed again. Before I could go in. Before I could reach inside. . . ."

His voice trails off, but I remember this part. I remember him clinging to me, his hands so firm that they bruise me. It feels like he holds me for days.

"You couldn't tell us anything," he says. "You didn't think any time had gone by at all. You were tired and cranky and overwhelmed. And you never wanted to go in again."

"You asked?"

He shakes his head. "You said. Without prompting. We stayed for a month. We never got her out."

And then he ordered the ship to leave. Because he knew he could spend the rest of his life struggling against that place. And he had a child. A miracle child, who had escaped.

"I dropped you with your grandparents and came back. I figured I could go in and get her. But I couldn't. Except for you, I didn't know anyone who had gotten out."

"Which is why you want me to go," I say.

He shakes his head. "I've found people willing to go inside. Nothing comes out."

"I thought you said you went with Riya Trekov. That she has a way out."

"She does. People go in. They come out. But they're always alone."

Now I ask him. "What'll you do if you get her? She won't be the same. You're certainly not."

"I know," he says, and for a moment, I think he's going to leave it at that. Then he adds, "None of us are."

We talk long into the night.

Or rather, I listen as he talks.

He tells me what he knows about the Room. He has an almost encyclopedic knowledge of the place, combined with a series of theories, myths, and legends he has collected over the decades.

What it all comes to is what I already know: No one knows who built the Room or the station it's on. No one knows when it was built—only that it predates the known human colonization of this sector. No one knows what its purpose was or why it was abandoned.

No one knows anything, except that people who go in do not come out.

Unless they're protected by Riya Trekov's device.

The device, as my father explains it, is a personal shield, developed by a company that's related to my father's old business. The shield relies on technology so old that few people understand it.

Sometimes I think all of human history is about the technology we've lost. We're constantly reinventing things.

Or recovering them.

Apparently, this device is something reinvented.

How it works is simple: It acts like a space suit—creating a bubble around the user that contains both environment and gravity and anything else the user might need.

It has the same flaws a space suit has as well: It allows a person to enter an environment but not interact with it—or at least, not interact in important ways.

But the shield is different from a space suit as well. From the first discovery of the Room, humans have tried to enter wearing spacesuits, and that has not worked.

So Riya Trekov's device negates something—or protects against something—that a space suit does not. Somehow, that device—that bubble it creates—is the perfect protection against the Room.

At least that is what my father would have me believe.

That's what Riya Trekov showed me briefly on Longbow Station.

But now I have more qualms than before. Because the more my father talks, the more disgusted I become.

He has spent all this time studying the Room. He has made that Room his life's work.

Yet he has never been able to risk that life, not even to pull me or my mother out of the Room.

As he paces around me, I think of all the times I've gone into a wreck, how I've looked for trapped divers, what I've risked to recover their bodies.

I've only failed to recover one.

On the Dignity Vessel. I left one of my divers behind because he was trapped in something I did not understand.

Like I do not understand Riya Trekov's device.

Like I do not understand the Room.

People have devoted their lives to the mystery that is the Room, and have learned nothing.

Unlike them, I do not want to learn anything. I don't even want to recover my mother or Ewing Trekov—both of whom I consider dead.

I want to see the Room for myself, to satisfy some curiosity that has plagued me since I was ten years old. In that, perhaps, I am more like my mother than my father. If his story is to be believed—and I am not sure it is—then my mother just wanted to see the anomaly for herself.

Which is, in part, what I want to do. But more than that, I want to see, experience, and understand from an adult perspective what had so influenced me as a child.

I want to know how much the Room formed me, the embittered wreck diver, the woman who once believed that preserving the past was more important than any money that could be made from it.

The woman who believed—and maybe still does—that the past holds secrets, secrets which, if understood, can teach us more about ourselves than any science can.

I do not tell my father any of this. I let him believe I'm doing a job. I pretend to be interested in all that he tells me.

And I pretend to be surprised when he tells me he wants to join me.

He says he wants to see the Room one last time.

It takes months to put a team together. The people who want to go to the Room are not experienced divers, or experienced space travelers for that matter. The people who do not want to go are the ones I need.

I am able to buy some of them—money goes a long way with people who live on the edge—but I cannot buy all. Most importantly, I cannot buy Karl, who was with me on the Dignity Vessel job.

At first, he won't even talk to me. But eventually, his curiosity gets the better of him. He agrees to meet me in the old spacers' bar in Longbow Station.

I am at the station alone. I told my father that I would not be able to recruit when he was around. He has a reputation for being difficult and for thinking he's in charge. I actually got him to sign legal documents attesting to the fact that he would not run anything on board my ship or do anything to command (or jeopardize) my expedition.

I am using three factors in picking my team: I want people who are creative—both mechanically and intellectually; I want people who have dived the most dangerous wrecks in the sector; and I want people who are honest.

Finding the last two is relatively easy—divers have to be honest or they don't survive. The survivors are usually the ones who have been on the most dangerous missions.

But most divers leave the creativity to the person in charge of the mission. Since, in the past, that was me, I never had the opportunity to work with other dive team leaders.

Except Karl.

He started his business after I quit mine. He took over my routes, and I didn't interfere with him because I believed I would never wreck dive again.

But that isn't the only reason I want him.

I want him because he's trustworthy—and he's dangerous.

I don't know a lot about his personal history, but I do know a few things, things I've observed and things he's told me.

He's ex-military and he's excellent with a knife. He can kill anything—and has, twice on dive trips, once before I knew him, and once after he opened his own business and trusted the wrong person.

He's cautious to a fault and yet oddly fearless. I say oddly because I've seen him back away from a dive because of worries about it, only to see him conquer those worries and go in.

I respect that about him.

I also know he can get my people back to Longbow if something happens to me.

He can get them back and he can handle my father.

Those elements are more important than creativity, more important than diving ability, more important than survival skills.

He has just come off a run of his own. He won't tell me where, which leads me to believe he has discovered a wreck he doesn't want me to know about.

His angular face seems even thinner than before, and his gray eyes



seem silver in this light. He looks older, as if leading his own expeditions has taken something out of him.

He wears a thin white shirt over his slender chest. His pants are too loose, suggesting that the thinness in his face isn't my imagination. He's lost weight.

He straddles a chair across from me, using the chair's back as protection between us. He wraps his arms around it and stares at me.

"You have some nerve," he says.

"Yes, I do." I smile.

He doesn't smile back.

Then I sigh and let the smile fade. "I would like to hire you for a run."

"And I would like to tell you to go fuck yourself." But he doesn't move. "But if I do, you'll just keep asking me. So I came to hear what you have to say and to tell you no in person."

I understand why he's angry at me. I also understand if he never works with me again. When I hired him to go to the Dignity Vessel, I didn't tell him what we were diving, even though I knew.

I didn't tell any of my team. I didn't want them to bring preconceptions to the dive.

That was just the first mistake I made on that trip—if I had spoken up, we might not have gone in, and we wouldn't have lost two divers.

Karl swore he'd give up diving after that, but he didn't. It's a hard profession to renounce. There isn't much left in this sector that allows the kind of freedom, risk, and adventure real wreck diving does.

"Just hear me out," I say to him.

This time, I tell him everything. I tell him about my past, about my father, about Riya Trekov and her father. I tell him about the Room and its dangers. I tell him about the pilgrimages and the quasi-religious symbolism others have found in the place.

Then I tell him what I remember of the Room itself.

That's when he finally moves. Just a little, but enough so that I know I've hooked him somehow.

And I'm not quite sure how.

"If what you say is true," he says, "this is the second wreck you want to bring me to that's out of time."

My breath catches. I knew that the station and the Room don't belong. I haven't allowed myself to make the mental comparison to the Dignity Vessel.

"You think it's related to the Dignity Vessel?" he asks.

"I don't know," I say. "There's always a chance. But I worry about preconceptions."

"Yeah," he says dryly. "I remember that about you."

The words sting.

"I might be wrong," I say. "Preconceptions might be necessary. I don't know. I just know I'm going to do this job as if it's a dive, and I want the best team possible."

"You realize the chances of someone dying on this trip are very high," he says.

"Yes." I swallow. That someone will probably be me.

He sighs. He's clearly thinking about the offer. We haven't talked money yet. I doubt money will mean much to him.

"What do you get out of this?" he asks. "Reconciliation with your father?"

I shake my head. "I want nothing from him."

"Yet you bring him along. That could compromise us right there."

I like the word "us." I didn't expect it. But I don't show him that I've noticed.

"I know it could," I say. "I'll need help minimizing contact with him."

"And your mother." He shakes his head. "This is fraught with emotion. You taught me that dives should have no emotion."

And yet our last dive was filled with it. We were trying to recover a body, and we couldn't. It devastated us both.

"I know," I say.

"If I go," he says, "I run the mission."

My entire body freezes. "How can it be my mission if you run it?"

"The dives," he says. "Anything to do with the Room. If I say we pull out, we pull out. If I say we leave someone behind, we leave them."

I bite my lower lip. I'm barely breathing.

"C'mon, Boss," he says, using my old divers' nickname. "You know that's why you're asking me to go. I'm the only one qualified, and the only one you'll listen to. You know that when I say we have to leave, I'll be right."

I let out the breath I was holding. Part of me has relaxed. He *is* right. That's why I chose to approach him. Because of our history. Because I know he's more cautious than I am, and because he has nothing at stake.

Except proving to me that I can be wrong.

"No grudges?" I ask.

He smiles for the first time. It's a sad smile. "I've lost two divers in the years since the Dignity Vessel. I don't know if I would have made the mistakes you made, but I've made some of my own. I think I'm finally beginning to understand you. So, no grudges. I'll do what's best for the mission, not what's best for Riya Trekov or your father. Or for you."

I nod. "You haven't even asked about money."

"I know you'll be fair," he says. Then his smile grows. "And I've always wanted to see the Room. The most mysterious place in this sector. I say let's go."

Maybe that's why such places catch and kill so many. Because they capture the imagination. Certainly that's why so many stories spring up around them.

And so many myths.

With Karl at my side, I do even more work. We sort through the repeated histories, and try to find the sources of various legends. We trace the Room in the modern era as best we can, and we ghoulishly make a list of all the souls known to have been lost in the place.

There are more than five hundred—and that's just recorded losses. Who knows how many others there were? No one has kept track of the abandoned single ships found near the station, or people on a pilgrimage all on their own.

In passing, I say to Karl that what we've learned isn't worth the time we've spent. And he says what we've learned is that there are no odd recorded stories, things that don't quite fit into the other stories.

Maybe there's even a recognizable pattern. There certainly is to the losses. What happened to my father and his crew is the same as what happened to the very first ship that discovered the place, centuries ago.

"The same," I say, "except me coming out of that Room."

"Except that," Karl says.

In the end, we put together a team of ten, not counting me or Karl or Riya or my father.

Karl will lead the mission once we arrive at the station. Until then, I am in charge. I'll be in charge again when we leave the station as well. It's only when we're docked—when we're near the Room—that Karl will have control.

We use the *Business*. It has never been so full—at least not as long as I owned it. My father has the captain's cabin, which assuages my conscience. I've cut him off from all command and all control, which has to be difficult for him. So I reward him with the best quarters on the ship.

Riya has the third best cabin. Mine is second best, and with its dedicated hardwired computer, I don't want anyone near it.

The dive team has the rest of the main deck and Karl has the only room on the upper deck. It has the best views, and is impressive, should anyone visit him. I want him to look powerful and in charge, even before he is.

Some—including my father—believe that I placed Karl in charge of the mission at the station because Karl and I are lovers. The dive team knows differently—it's no secret in the diving community how angry Karl was with me after the events with the Dignity Vessel—but they're under orders not to correct that misperception.

Karl helped me vet the dive team. Two women who'd been on some of his previous dives, an old-timer who has more experience than me and Karl combined, three superb and fearless pilots, three young men hired more for their strength than their diving ability, and another old colleague, a woman who had accompanied me on my earliest professional dives.

I have decided to treat this as a real dive, which means that we are focusing on the station, not just the Room. From everything that Karl and I have found, it seems people who have gone to the station have gone for the Room—or only spent time in the Room.

No one has given the habitats more than a cursory examination, not even the scholars. In fact, the scholars have mostly relied on the discoveries of others, being too afraid to examine things themselves.

On the first day out, I brief the dive team about our mission. We meet in the lounge. The *Business's* lounge is not for recreation. I put all of my playback and analysis equipment here. I also use it to analyze upcoming dives. There are comfortable chairs as well as two sofas, but they're arranged in an uncomfortable pattern—a semi-circle facing the various screens and portholes.

Nine members of the dive team are here, as well as myself and Karl. I

have banned Riya and my father from attending any meetings about the upcoming dives. The missing member of the team is the pilot who is currently flying the ship.

The team spreads around the lounge, trying to look casual, but I recognize the emotions here. Everyone is excited. The work is what they live for—it's what I used to live for—and when they're approaching something new, it's thrilling, not frightening.

I haven't felt the thrill yet. I haven't felt fear either, which I consider a victory. What I am feeling is nervous. I have no idea how any of this will play out.

I'm not sure how I want it to.

Still, I try to maintain an upbeat attitude, the way I used to do when I started dangerous dive missions in the past. I walk in front of the screens, looking every member of the team in the eye as I speak.

I am not as honest with them as I was with Karl. I do mention problems—my father, the loss of my mother to the Room, which is why Karl will lead once we get to the station—but I do not mention my own reservations.

Instead, I talk about the history.

"We are not looking for items to resell," I say, although everyone probably knows that. After all, they've signed on to dive with me and Karl, not some salvage divers or treasure hunters. "We're looking for information—anything that will tell us about the station, about who built it, how it came to be here—why it's out here at all so far away from everything—and what its purpose actually is."

"Do we know if the Room is an integral part of the station?" asks Roderrick. He's slight but broad-shouldered, a landbound pilot, who somehow became one of the most highly rated in the sector. I supervised his first shift with the *Business* and was impressed. He found my control shortcuts without explanation in a matter of minutes.

"We know nothing," I say. "We don't know if the Room's intentional or part of an accident."

"We do know," Karl says, "that the habitats next to the Room have been destroyed. But we don't know how. We don't know if someone destroyed them trying to block access to the Room or if the Room was something else and an accident or an explosion or something gone horribly wrong created the damage that we'll find around it."

"We're not scientists," says Odette. She's the oldest diver, whom I'd partnered with long ago. She is standing in the back of the lounge near the main exit, her stick-thin arms crossed. She looks delicate against the bulkhead, as if nothing could prevent her from floating off into space. "How are we supposed to know what happened in there or what any of it means?"

"Between us, we have centuries of experience with ancient technologies." I'm mostly talking to her and Karl now, but some of the other divers we hired have it as well. "We'll know as much or more than any scientist we bring out here."

"Besides," Karl says, "we are going to bring back as much information as we can about the station. Our goal is to be the definitive historical mission for the station and the Room."

"Is that why you wouldn't give us a timeline?" asks Tamaz, one of the young male divers we hired for his strength and not for his great experience. He has muscles along his arms and chest that I haven't seen in most divers. He probably had to have a special suit made.

But I wanted his strength in case we have to pull someone out of the Room. We've already established that machines can't do it, but a person might be able to. A very strong, very motivated person.

"We are not giving you a timeline because we can't," I say. "The Room's past history shows that people can sometimes be inside for hours or a day before coming out again."

Although the only history that showed that was mine. All of the people hired by Riya and my father came out within hours of going in, just like they were supposed to.

Both Karl and I felt the dive team didn't have to know this aspect of the Room's history—nor did they have to know the fact that I had already been inside. I did not want to be seen as an expert on the interior, particularly when I can't remember much about it.

"If there's no treasure inside, why would people go in?" asks Mikk, another of the strong young men. He's taller than Tamaz, but otherwise looks very much the same. I would have considered them brothers if I hadn't known otherwise.

"There's treasure," I say before Karl can comment. "But it's not the monetary kind. We warned you about that when we hired you for the dive."

Mikk waves his right hand. It's bigger than my thigh. "I'm not thinking for me. I mean all these five hundred people you say never came out. Why go in the first place?"

"You're not religious, are you, Mikk?" Davida asks softly. She's one of Karl's hires, a regular wreck diver who has the standard lean physique along with skin so taut it looks stretched over her frame.

"So?" He sounds defensive.

"That's what a pilgrimage is, something religious." Davida sounds sure of herself, but she's obviously not that religious either.

"Pilgrimages have religious connotations, yes," Odette says from her post in the back. This time, the dive team looks at her as if they haven't really noticed her before. "But a pilgrimage is also a mission to a special place, not just a sacred place. One could say this is a pilgrimage."

Her gaze is on mine. She knows some of my family's history, but I don't believe she knows all of it.

"It certainly is for Riya Trekov," I say, to cover my own discomfort. "She believes her father's soul is trapped in this place, and she believes we can recover it."

"Do you?" Tamaz asks me.

I think for a moment—the lights, the voices building one upon another, the clutch of my father's arms as he holds me tight.

"No," I say after a moment, "but that doesn't mean we aren't going to try."

The station is bigger than I remember, bigger than my father's descriptions of it, bigger than anything mentioned in the archives.

It looms ahead of the *Business* like a small asteroid or a tiny moon. It's gray in the constant twilight of space, the reflection of faraway stars making it seem brighter than it actually is.

There are no visible lights on the station, nothing that marks it as a landing site or a outpost or some kind of way station. There are no energy readings, faint or otherwise.

I fly us toward the station as Roderick, Karl, and the other two pilots—Hurst and Bria—monitor the audio bands, trying to find any sign of life coming from the place.

The five of us sit shoulder to shoulder as we work the controls. The cockpit feels crowded, even though it's built for ten or more. The station shows up on my viewscreen and in my controls as well as in the portholes throughout the ship.

Out of deference to my father, we do not dock on the exterior docking ring. That was where his large cargo ship docked—it couldn't go any deeper into the station itself—and that was where the nightmares that have haunted the rest of his life began.

Instead, I pick a smaller ring on the upper level, where the habitats are still intact. From here, it looks as if we've approached a darkened but working space station. Reflections in the exterior windows of the station make it seem as if someone is moving inside.

That startles Hurst—he even points it out—but Karl and I have approached so many wrecks we're used to the phenomenon.

"It's just us," he says. "We're seeing our own reflections."

Still Hurst works the sensors. He's not convinced. He's already spooked, and I don't like that. I need solid, steady people, not superstitious ones given to outbursts.

I make a mental note to keep him away from the pilot's chair during this part of the mission. And I will tell Karl that later on.

Right now, we settle into work. First we have to use our own equipment to map the station. Then we'll proceed with a dive plan.

"It's bigger than I thought," Bria says. She has steady hands, which I appreciate, and a quick sense of humor. Her dark head is bent over the controls, her hands moving across them as if the *Business* is a ship she's spent her entire life aboard.

"It's a lot bigger," says Hurst. His hands are shaking. He made it clear to us when he was hired that he'd never flown a mission like this. He'd mostly done combat zones. Active danger—shots, explosions—doesn't bother him. He's a quick thinker in that kind of situation, and since Karl and I didn't know what we were facing, we wanted one pilot with experience flying in and out of a constantly changing situation.

"All our previous readings are wrong," Karl says, and that's when I look. He gives me his handheld.

Previous specs showed the station to be one-quarter to one-half the size of this station.

"Are we in the right place?" Roderick asks.

I nod. The coordinates are right. The middle of the station is right as well. But I don't trust it. I do my own scan.

The readings on the exterior of the station are correct except for the



station's size. The strange metal, the age of the station itself, its unusual structure match the past specs.

"What the hell?" Roderick mutters.

Karl has frozen beside me. The hair on the back of my neck has risen.

"There are a million explanations," Bria says, oblivious to our reaction. "You said no one explored the whole thing. Maybe no one mapped it either. You're relying on stuff you've found in databases, which could be corrupted or tampered with or just plain wrong."

"True," Hurst says. "I've run into this all over the sector. Particularly in the lesser known parts. No one really cares how big something is unless they need to. Most people aren't that accurate."

But this is a place that ships have come to on pilgrimages. This is a place that has been studied.

And my own sense as we approached was that it has become bigger.

I swallow hard, but I don't say anything.

Instead, I get out of the pilot's chair and sweep my hand toward it, looking at Karl's angular face.

"It's your mission now," I say.

He hesitates. Then he takes a deep breath and slides into the pilot's chair. Of the five of us in the cockpit, he is, by far, the weakest pilot, but he knows what I'm doing.

I'm symbolically relinquishing command.

I have to.

I'm already not thinking rationally. I'm making things up based on my past experience.

And that terrifies me.

I leave them to mapping. I go to my quarters and log onto my dedicated computer. I call up files I haven't looked at in years.

Files that I stored after the Dignity Vessel.

Files on stealth technology.

Modern ships have stealth technology. It shields our ships from each other's instruments. But it does not make the ship completely invisible. It simply makes us invisible to all but the naked eye. If we pass in front of a porthole, someone on that ship will see us.

Our weak stealth technology is hard won. We've been working on it for generations, always seeking to improve it, and never doing so.

True stealth technology—the kind that actually makes a ship invisible (and, in some cases, impossible not just to see but to hear and touch)—is extremely dangerous. The kind of stealth that the ancients had actually changed the ship itself (or whatever the stealth was applied to). Some believe that the ship dissolved and reformed at a particular point. Others think it went out of phase with everything else in the universe. And still others believe that it actually left this dimension.

No one knows, exactly, because we have lost more technology than we have kept. The ancients had things we've never had. We don't understand what they did or the way that they built things. We lost that knowledge somewhere along the way.

Our military—our scientists—have attempted to reverse-engineer all

kinds of things, including the kind of stealth the ancient Dignity Vessels had, but to no avail.

An old military diving buddy of mine once said that kind of stealth tech was banned, the knowledge deliberately lost. She claimed that hundreds die every few generations or so when someone tries to revive the technology. She believes that stealth tech is beyond our grasp.

It certainly was on the Dignity Vessel that Karl and I dove. The stealth tech there was based on interdimensional science. Those ships didn't vanish off radar because of a "cloak," but because they traveled, briefly, into another world—a parallel universe that's similar to our own.

When I first heard this theory, I recognized it. It's the one on which time travel is based, even though we've never discovered time travel, at least not in any useful way, and researchers all over the universe discourage experimentation in it. They prefer the other theory of time travel, the one that says time is not linear, that we only perceive it as linear, and to actually time travel would be to alter the human brain.

But my experience in that Dignity Vessel showed me that it's possible to open small windows into other dimensions. Only in practice those windows don't work the way they do in theory. They explode or get stuck or ships get lost.

People get lost.

Is that what we're facing here? Yet another version of ancient stealth tech?

My skin is crawling.

That would be too simple, and too much of a coincidence.

And it wouldn't explain the voices.

This is why I have given over the controls to Karl earlier than I planned. Although I'm beginning to doubt the wisdom of that. Karl is as familiar with ancient stealth tech as I am and is scarred by it too.

I hope it won't affect his judgment here.

I stand and pace my small quarters, and as I do I remember the other reasons I hired Karl to run things.

Riya.

My father.

My mother.

Those voices.

No preconceptions, that's my motto. And I need to wait until mine are under control before I face the team all over again.

By the time I come out, the station is mapped. It is definitely larger than our research told us it would be. Karl wants to bring in my father, and I can't contradict him even though I don't want to use my father for anything.

We meet in the lounge. Fortunately, Karl has kept Riya out of this meeting. Most of the dive team is here and all of the pilots. The *Business*, safely docked, has its automatic alarms on in case something happens.

Still, this close to a dive, I hate leaving the cockpit unattended.

Karl reminds everyone that he is in charge now. Then he introduces my father—using all of his very impressive credentials—and says,

"I invited him into this meeting because he's been here before. He knows a lot about the station and even more about the Room."

Karl looks at me. My father is standing next to him, dwarfing Karl. My father, with his planet-bound height and muscle, looks almost superhuman compared to the divers. And even though he's older than everyone except, perhaps, Odette, he seems much more powerful.

I don't like the contrast.

"The changes in what we're expecting are enough to make me reassess the mission," Karl says.

I turn toward him, shocked. This isn't the man I hired all those years ago. This isn't Karl the Fearless.

He sees my look and holds up his hand to silence me. "I've learned over the years that it's best to talk about the unexpected, and even better to get the dive team's read on it. We're here to take extreme risks, but not unnecessary risks."

I dig my teeth into my lower lip, so that I don't contradict him—at least not yet. At least not this early in the very first meeting he's called.

Karl explains our findings, and he uses some impressive graphs and charts and diagrams that he's clearly worked on in the short time since he called the meeting. Then he turns to my father.

"What do you make of this?" Karl asks.

My father walks in front of the displays, his hands clasped behind his back like a professor grading a student's work. I get the sense that he likes the attention and is milking it.

"Your worry isn't necessary," he says after a minute. He addresses Karl as if the rest of us aren't here. "I've seen this before."

I remain still in the back of the lounge. Odette crosses her arms. Karl tilts his head, obviously intrigued.

"Every time I come here, the station is bigger." My father does not pause, even though he should have. The sentence sends a ripple of interest through the group and gives him the attention he obviously craves. "I think it's programmed to build new units, which is why the habitable ones are on the outer layers, not in the middle."

It's a plausible explanation, and no one asks him for his proof. I would have. My father is not a scientist, and he didn't back up what he just said with any statistics or experimentation. Just observation and a supposition.

"So it's normal," says Bria with something like relief.

"There's nothing normal about this place," my father says.

"How do we test the growing theory?" asks Jennifer. She's one of my hires, and she looks at me as she asks this, all wide eyes and innocence. But I've known her for a while, and Jennifer isn't innocent. She's annoyed that I've been forgotten, and she's pointing me out to the others on purpose.

I'm glad for the opening. "We test all theories. That's why it's best to go slow. The more we learn before we go to the Room, the better off we'll be."

"You actually think we'll learn something new about the Room?" Davida asks. She's sitting by Jennifer and Roderick on the couch. They glance at her in surprise.

"Why else come on this mission if you can't learn something new?" Roderick asks.

"It's just that this thing has existed for so long and no one knows anything about it," Davida says. "That's beginning to creep me out."

"We know some things," my father says and goes into his lecture on the history of the Room. He doesn't seem to notice that he's talking mostly about conjecture and theory, but some of the others do. They squirm. He's lost the attention he worked so hard to gain.

It takes Karl a while to shut my father down, but he finally does. Then Karl looks at me as if my father's lack of social graces are my fault.

I give Karl a half smile and a shrug.

Karl gets my father to sit. Then Karl sets up the dive roster for the following day—Bria piloting one of the four-man skips (so that our teams don't have to free dive to get into far sections of the station) and Davida, Jennifer, and Mikk in the upper habitats—with a promise of more when we meet that night.

The team shifts, but this time it isn't because of my father's long-windedness. It's because they're excited.

It's because they're ready.

We all are.

For the next three weeks, we dive the station, making detailed maps, exploring the new and old habitats, sharing small discoveries.

Every night we meet in the lounge and watch the captured imagery of that day's dives. The divers narrate and the others ask questions. That way, we all have the same information.

We learn quite a few things—the built-in furniture is the same in all of the habitats, although in the "new" section, as Karl likes to call it, it's not dented or warped or even scratched.

The new sections contain a few other things—remotes attached to entertainment equipment, equipment that doesn't seem to work "although it might if we can find a good way to power the entire station," my father says. "Maybe the entertainment programming is supposed to come from the damaged central area."

I don't like having my father in the lounge at night. He's not methodical and he's given to supposition. I think supposition is deadly. Karl finds it fascinating, but he can separate out the supposition from fact.

I'm not sure some of the younger divers can. Although they occasionally find my father long-winded, they seem to like him. They may even admire him.

I don't ask anyone what they think of him, not that they'd give me an honest opinion. Everyone is aware that he is my father and that we aren't on the best of terms.

Indeed, everyone else talks to him more than I do.

Including Riya, who daily complains that we are wasting her time and money. From the moment we arrived, she wanted us to go into the Room and do nothing else.

Fortunately, Karl is in charge of this part of the mission, and Karl must talk to her, reminding her that caution is our byword, and even if we don't recover her father on this trip, the information we gather might make it possible to recover him on the next.

One night, she came to me to complain. I waved her off. "You gave me as much time as I needed," I reminded her.

"Yes," she said. "I gave *you* that, not him."

"And I placed him in charge while we're at the station. I trust him."

She glared at me. "I hope that trust isn't misplaced."

So far, it doesn't seem misplaced. I approve of the way he's handling the team—dividing assignments based on experience and on interest. It soon becomes clear who likes going through debris-crowded destroyed habitats, and who prefers a minute exploration of the pristine edges of the station.

He has also kept track of the pilots—who handles the skip best in tight quarters and who is the most observant. And he hasn't lost track of the Room.

Once a week, he and I have gone around its exterior. The first time, we mapped it. The second time, we mapped again to see if it had expanded. The third, we just observed.

The station hasn't grown while we've been here. And we've seen nothing untoward about the Room, although on that first dive I was surprised to learn that the Room is encased on all sides.

For some reason, I thought part of it was open to space. I'm assuming that's because I saw the lights and they seemed to lead somewhere. And also, I'm sure I thought the Room had unlimited space because it has taken so many bodies.

When you peer through the main window, you can see none of those bodies. In fact, you can't even see the lights. It looks dark and empty, like the still-intact habitats.

Only when you shine a light inside, it disappears into the darkness. It does not reflect back at you.

My father claims to recognize all of this, which is making Karl grow more and more exasperated with him. At one point, in one of our nightly meetings, Karl snapped at him, "I asked you to tell us everything you knew about the Room."

My father shrugged. "I have."

"Yet each night, you have some new observation, some new memory."

My father didn't seem perturbed at Karl's tone. "You think small details are important, things I noticed, but never really thought much about. So when I remember them, I tell you."

Karl asked if there were other things like that which my father noted, things he wanted to tell us.

My father shrugged again. "I'm sure I'll remember when the time comes."

Karl looked at me and caught me rolling my eyes. But I said nothing to him or my father. Karl asked to command this part of the mission because he believed my observations and judgments would be compromised.

He's only beginning to realize that my father's are as well.

The readings have come back from the new habitats. They're composed of the same material as the rest of the station, only it isn't worn down by

centuries. It does seem newer, just like the interior furniture does. A lot points to my father's theory—that the structure is being built new—but I am not sure how.

If the station is adding to itself over time, I'm not sure what materials it's using. My father seems ignorant of the law of matter conservation, so he thinks it is possible to create something from nothing. I've never seen that happen.

Then, one night, I wake bolt upright on my bed, worried that the matter being used to make the new station comes from the bodies of the dead.

I have to do the calculations just to calm myself down. They show me that even with every part of a body being used, there isn't enough material.

Either the station has some kind of supply, something we don't recognize, or it is bringing matter in from elsewhere.

Or it isn't growing itself. It is revealing itself, as I feared.

And I find a lot of evidence to support that theory. At least, evidence that part of me wants to believe.

When we left the Dignity Vessel, we left one of our divers—Junior—inside. Because we were worried that he might still be alive but in some kind of time dilation, Karl and I went back to see if we could rescue him. Failing that, we hoped to find a way to help him die.

We learned that, indeed, Junior had gone through a time dilation, but not the kind we thought. He had aged so rapidly that the upper half of his body, still in its dive suit had mummified.

His waist and legs had only been dead for a day but his upper half, his torso and his face had been dead for centuries.

I find myself wondering if the station isn't going through the same sort of time split. Maybe the station is stuck in two different time frames. And like some stuck objects, it is slowly sliding out of whatever held it.

Which would explain how it "grew" each time my father had visited, and why the newer areas didn't seem to age. Maybe the time split here is the opposite of the one we'd found on the Dignity Vessel.

Instead of time progressing rapidly in the part we couldn't reach, it is progressing slowly there—or maybe not at all. Perhaps the parts of the station being revealed are in a section between time, between dimensions.

I'm no scientist, and I have no way to test my theories. I don't even want to mention them to Karl. He has enough to worry about.

I do mention one worry, however. I tell him it concerns me that the station expanded outward, and I make him promise no skip and no diver will travel to the outer edges.

I don't want another Junior. I don't want someone to get stuck between two times or two dimensions or two universes.

I want to be cautious and in this, as in everything else, Karl agrees.

Everything seems to be going fine, and despite my discomfort, my mood has improved. The divers are enjoying their dives and no one has had a close call or been injured.

We're not lulled into complacency, however. We know that the worst part of the dive is ahead, and that it belongs to me.



I've been preparing, and not just in my visits to the Room. I've spent most of my free time examining Riya's device. I've run it through my computers, trying to find its origin, and cannot.

It is made of familiar materials, but they're grafted onto a center that I do not recognize or understand. The materials in that center aren't anything like what I found on the Dignity Vessel or here at the station, and for that I'm relieved.

It doesn't seem to do much when it turns on—I get a small energy spike, and lights run along the edges of the device. But I don't sense the bubble or see momentary shimmer or something that would imply an actual shield going around me.

But a lot of things work without being obvious. And I'm not testing the device in zero-G. I'm testing it in Earth Normal, in full environment. I don't want to test it outside the ship, lest I cause problems.

I wish I knew more about the device, but Riya can't tell me much. She says she got the shield through her father's connections.

She can tell me nothing else.

So I memorize the exterior dimensions of the Room, so that I can find the edges even if I can't see them. And I try to ignore the music in my head, which seems to grow each and every day.

Grow isn't exactly the right word. The music plays a little longer each time I "hear" it. It isn't louder or any more insistent. It's just harder to shut off.

I'm actually becoming used to it. In the past it would distract me and I would have to concentrate on anything outside myself while the voices sang. Now they're a background accompaniment, and I wonder if I would actually notice them if I weren't planning to go back inside the Room so soon.

The night before I go in, Karl calls me to his quarters. I haven't been up to them since I assigned them. I'm startled to see that he's blocked the view of the station, but has left the portals that open to the space views clear.

He's sitting near the clear portals, his back reflected in them. His eyes are wide, and for the first time since I've given him control, I worry that he's not up to it.

Something has unsettled him.

"You okay?" I ask as I sit across from him. My back is to the station. Although the portals are opaqued against it, I can feel it looming, almost as if it's a living entity, one that grows and changes and becomes something else.

"I'm a little uncomfortable," he says and shifts in his seat as if to prove the remark. "I've put this conversation off too long."

I stiffen. One of the risks of giving him control is that he would keep it, that he would make the mission—and in some ways, the ship—his. I trusted him not to do that, but that trust suddenly feels fragile.

"What's going on?" I ask, careful to keep my voice calm.

"I've been thinking a lot about tomorrow's dive," he says. "I don't think you should do it."

The words hang between us. I make myself breathe before responding.

"Have you seen something that makes the dive untenable?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "The dive is fine. I think we should go ahead with it. I just don't think you should be the one to go in."

My face heats. "That's the whole point of this mission."

"Going into the Room to recover Commander Trekov is the point of this mission—the central point, the one you and I agreed on. But this whole mission is larger than that, and we're learning some great things. We wouldn't have done that without you."

He clearly planned that little speech. It sounds forced.

"Who'll go in?" I ask.

"Me," he says.

"Alone?" The word squeaks out. I'm surprised and can no longer hide it.

"I have the most dive experience next to you," he says.

"Actually, that's not true. Odette does."

"All right, then," he says. "You and I have the most diving experience on dangerous wrecks. She's spent the last fifteen years on tourist runs."

"Like me," I say softly.

"You haven't spent fifteen years at it, and if that were the only problem, I'd ignore it."

I want to cross my arms and glare at him. But I don't. I put him in charge for a reason. I'm going to hear him out.

"So what are the other problems?" I ask.

He takes a deep breath. "Your father, for one."

"I don't like him," I say. "We have history. So what?"

"You have a shared history. And it has to do with the loss of your mother." Karl folds his hands across his knee, then unfolds them. He's clearly nervous.

"We discussed this," I say. "That's why you're in charge."

"I know," he says. "But that loss is significant. It caused the rift between you two and it changed both of your lives. I've heard your story about the Room and you were entranced by that place."

"I was happy to get out," I say, repeating what my father told me.

"But you went in willingly. What if the Room causes some kind of hypnosis? What if you're still susceptible to it? It's irresponsible to send you in on the first dive."

I'm about to protest when I register the word "first."

"You think there will be more than one dive?" I ask.

"There has to be," he says. "We do it by the book. We map and observe and then we discuss. If we're going to remove something from the Room, we do so on the final dive."

"So you want to do at least four dives," I say.

He nods. "The problem is that we only have one device, so only one of us can go in at a time. You'll be looking for your mother. You know you will—"

I'm shaking my head, but deep down, I know he's right. Of course, I'll be looking for her. And for Commander Trekov, and the others trapped in that place.

"—and you won't be focused on the small but necessary details. I will. I've made a point of not looking at your mother's image or Commander Trekov's. Even if I see them, I won't recognize them. They'll be part of the entire package. I won't be tempted to move too quickly."

I swallow hard. "Why not send someone else in? It's a risky mission. You're in charge. You should stay out here."

"It is risky," he says. "But you'll be out here. And if I can't survive with that device, no one else will be able to, either. So you'll abort and get everyone out of here."

"We can make that decision together," I say. "Send in another diver."

"Who? Odette? Mikk? Who are you going to send in, knowing that most people who have gone inside that Room have died? Are you willing to risk their lives?"

I don't say anything. We both know that I wasn't willing when I hired them. I knew there was only one device and I would be the one to use it. Everyone else was brought in, initially, to help extract me from the Room, not to go in and explore.

"I'm not willing to risk yours either," I say.

"You don't get a choice." He's calmer now. His gaze meets mine. Those gray eyes reflect the darkness of the portals behind me. "You put me in charge."

"But I still have the device," I say. "And I'm not giving it to you."

"No, you don't have it," he says. "That's why I wanted to meet you here. I had it removed from your quarters."

I feel so violated I have to prevent myself from lunging at him. No one goes in my cabin. No one even has access.

Except I gave him command. He has the codes.

He must have looked them up.

"I'm sorry," he says.

My face is so hot that it feels inflamed. I'm gripping my chair, and it takes all of my energy to stay in one place. Fighting him will do neither of us any good.

In handing over command, I also gave him implicit rights to imprison me in my own ship. I'm not going to give him the satisfaction.

"You know this is the right decision," he says.

I'm not going to acknowledge that.

"You're the one who taught me that emotion can be deadly to a dive," he says.

I get up. I trust myself to walk to his door and to get out. But that's all I trust.

Still, I stop. "You will never violate the sanctity of my cabin again."

He nods. "I'm sorry," he says again. "I had Odette wear her recorders and keep them on. She knows if she touched anything other than the device I'll have her hide."

It isn't the touching that bothers me. It's the entering.

That is my private space. No one else belongs in there.

My quarters are so private they almost feel like an extension of myself.

I don't say any more. I step into the hallway, wait until the door closes, and lean against the wall.

A part of my brain already acknowledges that his decision is sensible. I know that when I calm down, I'll agree. Four dives into the Room is actually the minimum for a dangerous area.

Not one, like I'd been planning.

I'd been thinking like a survivor of a disaster, not like a wreck diver.  
And Karl understands that.

He's protecting me from myself, yes, but more than that, he's doing his job.

He's making sure the mission is a success.  
And I hate him for it.

I insist on being in the skip the next morning. Karl lets me on board, but he won't let me pilot. I am strictly an observer.

Today's pilot is Roderick. Karl's diving partner—a misnomer, really, since Karl has to go in alone—is Mikk. I've brought my suit just in case, but Karl gave it a filthy look as I entered the skip.

He doesn't want me entertaining any thoughts of diving the Room. I'm along for two reasons: as a courtesy to me, and so that we don't have to explain our plan to my father or Riya.

They've proven more rigid than I could ever be. As time has progressed, they've complained more and more about the habitat dives. They want someone in the Room and they want it soon.

They don't even know we're going in today. In the last several meetings, Karl has left out the diving rosters and locations until my father was gone.

Karl thought I would object to keeping them in the dark about the Room dive. But I don't. I haven't liked the access he's given them from the beginning. That's more than I would have offered.

Roderick is good at flying the skip in enclosed spaces. We want the skip as close to the entry point as possible. That way, the divers don't have to cover a lot of known ground before going into the important part of the dive. It saves time and could save lives if someone got into trouble.

In this case, the skip would have to go into the destroyed habitats. It's not as dangerous as it sounds. Most of the debris has been cleared by time or by scavengers. Roderick flies with the portals closed, which makes me feel blind.

But he focuses on instruments, and he's so good with them that I don't complain. Not that I have any right to, anyway.

Because the distance between the Room and the *Business* is so short, Karl has already put on his suit. It's an upgrade from the days when we dove together, but it resembles the one he had before.

Karl likes redundant systems. His suit is expensive and a little bulky. It has an internal environmental system, like all suits, but it also has an external one.

He used to carry only two extra breathers. Now he has four, and they're larger than the ones he used to have. Apparently the Dignity Vessel experience has had a greater impact on him than he's willing to admit.

Instead of a slew of weapons in the loops along his belt, he carries a few tools and his knife. The knife has a long curved blade and has saved his life more than once.

I find myself staring at it throughout the short journey, wondering what he would use it on inside that Room.

Mikk has also suited up. He'll go as far as the Room's door and wait

there—not the best assignment, especially for a young diver. But if Mikk doesn't know patience by now, he'll never learn it. And he swears he understands how long he might have to monitor that door.

Roderick anchors the skip to the remaining wall so that he won't have to use thrust in the small space. He and I will wait on board and will monitor everything through the suit cameras that Karl and Mikk will wear. They'll also have audio in their headpieces.

The dive will follow a strict schedule. Because Karl doesn't have a lot of distance to traverse between the skip and the Room's door, we decided on a two-hour dive—longer than I would have liked, and shorter than he wanted.

It'll only take him five minutes to get inside and, theoretically, five minutes to get back. The rest of the time, he should be observing and mapping.

Provided his equipment works inside. To our knowledge, no one has filmed the interior of the Room, and we don't know if that's because they haven't thought of it or if they didn't succeed when they tried.

Just before he puts on his headpiece, he attaches the device to his belt. Since we don't know much about how the device works, we don't want it inside his suit. We want to give him as much protection as possible.

Then he slips on his headpiece. It's as cautious as the rest of his suit—seven layers of protection, each with a different function including double night vision, and computerized monitors layered throughout the external cover. He hands me the handheld, which will report everything the cameras on the sides of his headpiece “see.”

We are the least confident in the handheld. The shield device might disrupt the signals the cameras send back. We tested as best we could near the *Business* and didn't have any trouble, but we're not sure if that was an accurate test.

Like so much with wreck diving, this part of the dive gets tested only in the field.

I'm nervous. Karl is not. Roderick hasn't said anything, and Mikk acts as if this is a normal dive. While he's curious about the Room, it's an intellectual curiosity. He knows he won't be able to dive it this trip, so it's not the center of his attention.

In some ways, he's along for the ride, even more than I am.

We don't tether to the Room—that would be dangerous with the skip powered down—but we do extend a line. Karl is doing this as a courtesy to me. I won't dive without lines. I've seen too many divers get wreck blindness—they turn on their headlamps in a small space, they take a laser to the eyeball, their suit's visor malfunctions—and they can't get back without help.

The line is the simplest form of help. If they follow it from skip to wreck, then they know how to get back. We don't use lines inside wrecks, although I suggested it for the Room.

Karl gave that suggestion a lot of thought, and had an alteration. Once he reaches the door, he will attach a tether to one of the loops on his belt. If he loses consciousness in there, we can pull him back.

Mikk and Karl proceed to the airlock. They wave as they step inside.

They wait the required two minutes as their suits adjust. Then Mikk presses the hatch and Karl sends the lead out the door.

It only takes a moment to cleave to the jamb beside the Room's door. We picked that spot because it seemed soft enough to hold the line. Nothing else around the Room's exterior did.

They're stepping out of the airlock. They'll move at a very slow pace because they're good divers. They'll test the line. They'll make sure each part of their suits is functioning. Then they'll travel slowly to that door, and coordinate before Karl goes in.

I take those few minutes to walk into the cockpit. Roderick is sitting in what I consider to be my seat—the pilot's chair—and is already monitoring the readouts. In addition to the skip's cameras, some suit monitors send information directly to the skip itself. And both suits send heart-rates and breathing patterns—or will so long as nothing interferes with the signal.

I plug Karl's handheld into one small screen but only look at it to make sure the information is coming to me. Grainy flat images, mostly of the line, appear before me.

Then I look up. Roderick still has the portals opaqued.

"Let's watch this in real time," I say.

He doesn't look up from the instrumentation. "I don't like staring at interior station walls when I'm on a skip."

"I don't care," I say. "We have a team out there. We need our eyes as well as our equipment. We need every advantage we can get."

I shudder to think he's run dives in the habitats on instruments only, and make a mental note to tell Karl that night. It should be a requirement for each dive that the pilot watches from the cockpit. The pilot won't be able to see inside some of the spaces, but he will be able to see if there's a problem between the lead and the skip itself.

"Karl says I'm supposed to make the decisions," Roderick says.

"Well, I have twenty years of dive experience, and let me tell you, only amateurs let their people out of a ship on instrument only."

He winces, then flattens his hand against the control panel. With a hum, all of the windows become visible.

Usually being in the skip with the windows clear feels as if you're inside a piece of black glass moving through open space. Right now, it seems as if we've crashed into a junkyard. A blown wall opens to space on our left side. Beneath us, the habitat's floor is in shreds. Above us is the sturdy floor of the next level, and to our right is the line, leading to the Room's door.

Karl's already halfway down the lead. Mikk is hurrying to catch up.

I look at their breathing and heart rates. They're in the normal range. But it's not like Karl to move that fast.

I touch the communication panel. "You seeing something?"

"There's not a lot between the skip and the door, Boss." There's laughter in Karl's voice, as if he expected me to ask this question. "Relax."

I take my hand off the panel. Roderick is glaring at me, but in his expression I can see resignation. He knows that I'm going to run this skip while Karl's gone.



Roderick also knows he has no recourse. Even when Karl returns, telling on me won't make any difference. Karl won't ban me from these missions. If he does, I'll declare this entire trip a bust and leave. Then I'll return on my own or with a new team and dive it all again.

Karl reaches the door and tugs on the lead, checking its hold. It seems to be fine. Mikk arrives a moment later. His feet are curled beneath him, but they could just as easily brush against the floor.

This is the part of Mikk's dive that I would hate—floating there, waiting for Karl to do the actual work. For the first time since Karl changed our plans, I'm happy to be in the skip. At least I can pace here.

Karl runs a gloved hand along the door's edge. The cameras on his wrist light up and show what we saw on our preliminary dive—that the edges of this door are pockmarked—not from time or debris—but from people trying to break in. The metal is smoother here than anywhere else, as if countless people have run their gloved hands along the edges in the past.

*"It's beautiful, isn't it?" my mother asks me through her suit. She turns her head toward me just a little, and I can see the outlines of her face through her headpiece. Behind her something hums.*

Sweat has formed on my forehead. Goddamn Karl, he's right. I would have gotten lost in my own head, in my own memories, if I had gone in alone on this first trip.

I shake my head as if I can free it from the past and settle into the co-pilot's chair.

Karl pans the door, making sure nothing has changed since the last time we looked at it. Then his gloved hand slips down to the latch.

My breath catches as the door opens. The lights on his suit flare. He turns toward us, waves again, and then goes inside.

For a moment, I can see him outlined against the Room's darkness. Then he propels himself deeper and he is no longer visible through the clear windows of the skip.

The monitors show that his heart rate is slightly elevated. His breathing is rapid, but not enough to cut the dive short. This is the kind of breathing that comes from excitement and eagerness, not from panic or the gids.

"My God," he says. "This place is beautiful."

*"It's even prettier inside," my mother says. Her voice sounds very far away. The lights blink against her suit, making her seem like she's covered in bright paint—all primary colors.*

"You should see this," he says.

The cameras have fuzzed. We're not getting any visuals at all. The audio is faint.

"I don't like this," Roderick says as the instruments slowly fail.

I knew it would happen. Maybe I remembered something—or something in my subconscious recalled how faint my mother's voice had become. But I had known.

I had warned Karl and he said he was prepared.

But I'm cold. I'm sitting in the co-pilot's chair with my arms wrapped around my torso, feeling terrified.

My father said the device worked.

But what if it fails like the cameras fail?

Riya says a dozen others went in and came out. She showed me evidence.

Showed us evidence.

Karl made this choice.

"I don't like this at all." Roderick's hands are flying across the board, trying to bring up the readings. I glance at the handheld screen. The image is still there, faint and reassuring. Just a blur in all the fuzz.

Karl is moving forward.

But I know better than to tell Roderick everything will be all right. I glance at Mikk through the clear porthole.

He's holding the lead and waiting, just like he's supposed to. And good man that he is, he isn't even peering in the door.

He's following orders to the letter.

Static, a buzz, and an harmonic. A voice? I can't tell. Roderick is still working the instrument panel and I'm staring through the window at the door beyond.

All I see is blackness.

Karl is probably seeing lights. Hearing voices in harmony. Listening to the blend.

I hope the device protects him.

My arms tighten. My stomach aches. I feel ill.

I catch myself about to curse Karl for being right about my reactions. But I'm superstitious. I can't curse him. Not now.

Not while we're waiting for him to come out of that Room.

We wait for an hour. Then an hour and a half.

Then two.

At two hours ten minutes, Mikk asks, "Should I reel him in?"

We haven't had any contact. We don't have any readings.

Karl is the kind of diver who never wastes a second, the kind who is always on time.

"How much oxygen does he have without the refills?" I ask Roderick.

"Five, maybe six hours, so long as he's breathing right. He didn't think he needed the larger storage, since the skip was so close."

I would have made the same judgment. My suit can handle two weights of oxygen as well. The back-ups are in case the internal supply gets compromised somehow, not as supplements to it.

"You want to wait another hour?" Roderick asks. No more pretense at being in charge. We both know I'm the one qualified to make the right decisions.

And oddly, as cold as I am, I'm calm. The emotions I felt at the beginning of the dive are long gone.

It's the two younger members of the team who are beginning to panic.

And that's reason enough to bring Karl in.

"Tug," I say to Mikk. "See if he responds."

Mikk tugs and then grunts as if in surprise. The tether attached to Karl has gone slack.

Roderick looks at me, terrified. Mikk says, "What do I do?"

We have to know the severity of this.

"One more gentle tug," I say. Maybe Karl has let out the line. Maybe he's closer than we think.

Mikk tugs again. I can see how little effort he uses, how his movement should just echo through the tether.

Instead it comes careening back at him, with something attached.

Something small and U-shaped.

"Oh, no," Mikk says.

And I hear the same words come out of my mouth as I realize what I'm seeing.

"What is it?" Roderick asks, his voice tight with fear.

"Karl's belt," I say. "The tug dislodged Karl's belt."

Only, it turns out, my assessment isn't entirely accurate. The tug didn't dislodge Karl's belt.

Karl did. He unlatched it. There's no way to tell how long ago he did so, either.

He got disoriented or lost or maybe he was reaching for the tether to pull himself back. Whatever happened, his fingers found the controls holding the belt to his suit and unhooked it.

Mikk shows us the seal with his own cameras, how it's unhooked in such a way that only the suit-wearer could have done it. It didn't break and it didn't fall off.

Karl let it go.

*"So pretty," my mother says, her voice a thread. "So very pretty."*

"Pan it for me," I say, forcing the memory of my mother aside.

Mikk does. The knife is in its holder. So are the back-up breathers.

And the device.

Mikk grabs it as I realize what I'm seeing. "I'm going after him," Mikk says, attaching the device to his belt.

"No," I say with great force. "You are staying put."

"But we need to get him. He can't be that far in. The tether didn't come back from a great distance."

"I know," I say. "But going in disoriented him, and he's got more experience than you. It'll disorient you. I'm going in."

"He said you're not supposed to dive." Roderick has put his hand on my arm.

I shake it off.

"I've been in there before," I say. "I know what to expect. Neither of you do. Mikk is strong enough to get me out if he has to. We'll double-tether me. We'll hook to my belt and my suit. He'll be able to pull us free."

"Karl says if you lose one diver, you shouldn't send another after him." Roderick is speaking softly. He thinks he's not being overheard, but I have the communications panel lit.

"That's if the other person's dead or dying," I say. "For all we know, he's wreck blind and lost. You want him to float around in there?"

"Can he survive without this device thing?" Mikk asks.

Roderick starts at Mikk's voice, then frowns at me.

"I did," I say. "I didn't have a shield. People do survive the Room without protection. The problem is that most folks don't even realize their companions are in trouble for hours. Maybe the Room doesn't kill them. Maybe the Room disorients them. Maybe, if that's what happens and if someone catches it soon enough, the other person gets out."

"Two point five hours," Mikk says, sounding breathless. "That's quick, isn't it?"

"Do you need to come into the skip?" I ask him as I grab my suit. I strip, not caring that Roderick is watching. I hate wearing the suit over my clothes. "You sound like you're short of air."

"I have plenty," Mikk says.

"You can recover while I'm getting suited," I say.

"His heart rate is elevated, but still in the safe zone," Roderick says.

"But if you want to bring him in, then let's do it now."

Abort. Leave Karl. That's what Roderick is saying, in code now that he realizes Mikk—and maybe Karl himself—is listening.

"Stay there," I say. "I'm coming to you."

I have to slow down. I need to dress properly, make sure my suit functions. My own heart rate is elevated, and I'm trying not to listen to the low hum that's been haunting the back of my brain since that damn door opened.

My suit is thinner than Karl's. Body-tight with fewer redundant controls. I used to think he was too cautious. Now I wish I had all the equipment he did.

I check systems, then put on my head gear. I don't bother with extra cameras, although I don't tell Roderick that. I slide on my gloves, grab five tethers, and sling them along my belt hook like rolled up whips.

I open the airlock and look directly at Roderick. "Now you're in charge," I say as I let the door close.

The two minutes it takes for my suit to adjust seem like five hours. I work on slowing my own breathing, making sure I'm as calm as I can be.

Then I press open the exterior door.

My suit immediately gives me the temperature and notes the lack of atmosphere. It warns me about some small floating debris.

I place my hand on the lead and slide toward Mikk. I can see his face through his headgear.

He looks terrified.

Now I wish we hadn't brought one of the strong divers. I would give anything for someone with a lot of experience.

But I don't have that.

I have the children.

And I have to make the most of them.

Mikk attaches tethers to my belt, my suit and one of my boots. I must look like some kind of puppet. I warn him not to tug for at least an hour, unless I tug first. I take the device, turn it off, then turn it on, and make sure the lights run along the bottom and sides the way they're supposed to.

They do.

I attach it to my belt.

Then I float toward that damn door.

The opening looks smaller than I remember and somewhat ordinary. In my career, I'd gone through countless doors that led to an inky blackness, a blackness that would eventually resolve itself under the lights of my suit.

But right now, I have those lights off. I want to see the interior as I remember it. I want to see the light show.

Only I don't. There are no lights. The persistent hum that I'd been hearing since we arrived has grown.

It sounds like the bass line to a cantata. I freeze near the door and listen. First the bass, then the tenors, followed by altos, mezzo sopranos, and sopranos. Voices blending and harmonizing.

Only they aren't. What I had identified years ago as the voices of the lost is actually some kind of machine noise. I can hear frequency and pitch, and my mind assembled those sounds—or to be more accurate, those vibrations—into music, which as a child was something I could understand.

Now I understand what I'm hearing and for the first time since I go into the Room, I'm nervous.

"Your heart rate is elevated," Roderick says from the control room.

"Copy that," I say, and flick on my suit lights. They illuminate everything around me. There's a floor, a ceiling, the window that we'd already observed, and walls.

A completely empty room.

Except for Karl, floating free in the middle of it. His face is tilted toward the floor, his legs bent, his feet raised slightly. Occasionally he bumps against something and changes trajectory.

He's either unconscious or—

I don't let myself complete that thought. I use a nearby wall to propel myself toward him. I grab him by the waist and pull him toward me. His bulky suit is hard to hold; I undo the tether on my boot and attach it to his right wrist.

That's not normal procedure—you could pull off the arm of the suit if you're not careful—but I don't plan to let go of him. Instead, I tug my remaining tethers, and hope Mikk is strong enough to pull us both out.

It takes a moment, and then we're moving backward. I shift slightly so that I can see if we're about to hit anything.

The empty room stuns me. I expected not just the lights, but shades of the people lost. Or their remains. Or maybe just a few items that they had brought in with them, things that had fallen off their suits and remained, floating in the zero gravity for all time.

The previous divers wearing the device said they couldn't recover Commander Trekov—that he wouldn't leave. Were they lying? Or had they seen something I hadn't?

The open door looms. I kick away from the wall and float a little too high. I have to let go of Karl with one hand to push away from the ceiling.

Then we slide through the door and into the destroyed habitat. Mikk still clings to the tethers.

I shove Karl at him, then reach behind me and grab that damn door.

It takes all of my strength to close it. There's some kind of resistance—something that makes the movement so difficult that I can't do it on my own.

I'm not going to ask Mikk for help, though, and I'm not going to leave the door open. I grunt and shove, then turn on the gravity in my boots for leverage. I sink to the metal floor, brace my feet, and push that door.

It takes forever to close. I'm sweating as I do, and my suit is making little beeping noises, warning me about the extreme exertion. Roderick is cautioning me, and Mikk is telling me to wait so that he can help.

I don't wait.

The door closes and I lean on it, wondering how I can close it permanently, so no one ever goes in there again.

I can't come up with anything—at least, not something I can do fast—so I make sure it's latched, and then I turn off the gravity in my boots. As I float upward, I grab the lead.

I wrap my other hand around Karl and pull him with me. Mikk is protesting, repeating over and over again that he can bring Karl in.

Of course, Mikk can bring him in, but he won't. I'm the one who brought Karl here. I'm the one who put him in charge. I'm the one who didn't protest when he wanted to go into that Room alone.

He's my responsibility, and I need to get him back to the skip.

It only takes a few minutes. It's not hard to move him along. Mikk moves ahead of us and pulls open the skip's exterior door. Together we shove Karl into the airlock and then follow him inside.

I detach the lead. As I close the exterior door, I hear Mikk gasp.

I turn.

His body is visibly trembling. He's looking into Karl's faceplate.

I walk over to them and look.

Karl's face has shrunken in on itself. His eyes are gone, black holes in what was once a handsome face.

"He's dead," Mikk says and he sounds surprised.

That's when I realize I'm not. I think I knew Karl was dead when his belt appeared at that door. Karl's too cautious to lose his extra breathers, his weapons, and the device.

"What happened to him?" Roderick asks from inside the skip.

I touch Karl's faceplate. It's scratched, cloudy, marred by the passage of time. The suit is so fragile that my grip has loosened its exterior coating.

He didn't just die. He suffocated. Or froze. Or both. His suit ran out of oxygen. The environmental systems shut off, and he was left to the blackness of space as if he were outside the station, unprotected.

"Is it something catching?" Roderick's voice rises.

"No," I say. At least, not yet. Someday we'll all die from the passage of time.

"Then what is it?" Roderick asks. I realize at that moment he's not going to open the interior door until I tell him.

"The device malfunctioned," I say, and that's true. It didn't protect him, although it protected me. "The Room killed him."

"How?" Mikk asks, his voice nearly a whisper.

All I have is a working theory at the moment, and I learned long ago not to let others know my theories. It causes problems, particularly if I'm right.



"I don't know exactly how," I say, and that's not entirely a lie. I don't know the mechanics of what happened exactly, although I do know what caused it.

That Room has a functioning stealth system. Ancient stealth, not the stuff we invented. The kind we found on the Dignity Vessel. Only here, it works, and has continued to work over time.

That's why we couldn't find an energy signal, like we did on the Dignity Vessel. Because the stealth tech is working here, masking everything, including itself.

The station isn't growing. The stealth shield is degrading. The exterior parts of the station move in a slower time frame. The interior part, nearest the stealth tech itself, is moving at an accelerated pace.

That's why Karl died when the device malfunctioned. Time accelerated for him.

I wonder if that was when he saw the lights. Time passing, things appearing and changing, like the light from stars long gone, seen over a distance. At least he hadn't died frightened.

Or had he? Thinking he was alone in that big empty Room.

Thinking we had abandoned him.

Like all the other souls lost in that horrible place.

We get him inside. It's harder in real gravity; he's heavier than I expected. Roderick and Mikk want to remove the suit, to see what really happened, but I talk them out of it.

We'll do it on the *Business*.

We fill out logs, download information, remove equipment—all the things you're supposed to do at the end of a dive. We do it without speaking, and while trying not to look at the body on the floor behind us.

Then Roderick goes to the cockpit. Mikk sinks down beside Karl, as if staring at him would bring him back. I take out the device. It's still on. The lights run along the bottom in the same pattern they did when I picked it up from Mikk.

I shut it off again, then turn it on. I can feel no vibration, nothing to signal that the thing is working. Nothing changes around me—no visual shift, no audio hallucination.

Nothing.

Just like before.

I should have seen that as a warning.

But I didn't.

It was my fault for trusting technology I didn't understand.

Moments later, the skip arrives at the *Business*. Roderick sends the signal and we ease into the docking bay. The doors shut behind us, and the countdown begins until the atmosphere inside the bay gets restored.

No one here knows that Karl is dead. No one knows how spectacularly we failed.

I tell Roderick and Mikk that Karl has to remain on the skip. We'll send in some of the other crew to retrieve him, while I look up the forms he filled out so that we would take care of his body according to his wishes.

I also tell them not to say much until we meet tonight in the lounge.

Then I take the device, tuck the handheld into my pocket, and leave the skip. I'm going to meet the team first and I'm going to tell them what went wrong.

My father and Riya are standing near the door. No one else is with them and I have the distinct impression they've prevented the rest of the team from coming here.

My father is smiling. Riya is looking hopeful. Somehow they know we were in the Room.

All of my good intentions fade.

I toss the device at them. "This damn thing malfunctioned."

It skitters across the floor. My father is staring at me. Riya bends down to pick it up. As she stands, she frowns.

"Obviously it didn't fail," she says. "You're here."

"I'm here," I say, "but Karl is dead."

"Karl?" Riya glances at my father as if he understands what I'm talking about.

And to his credit, he does. "You let Karl go into the Room?"

"I didn't let him do anything," I snap. "He's in charge."

Or he *was* in charge. But I don't correct myself.

"He chose to go in. He decided last night."

"You let him?" my father repeated.

Behind me, I can hear the door to the skip snap shut. Footsteps along the floor tell me that Roderick and Mikk have joined us, but have stopped just a few meters back.

"How irresponsible of you," Riya shakes her hand. "I gave this to you with the express understanding that you would use it."

"Really?" I say. "You gave it to me so someone could access that Room and recover your father, which isn't possible by the way."

"You were supposed to go. That's the basis for our agreement." She's still shaking the device at me. "You were supposed to go."

She didn't react to what I said about her father. Maybe she hadn't understood me.

"What you want," I say slowly, as if I'm talking to a child, "is not possible. Your father is not recoverable. Didn't the previous people who went in tell you that? Didn't they tell you how empty that fucking Room is?"

"It's not our responsibility that he died," she says. "You didn't follow my instructions."

I know she heard me the second time. And it's clear she doesn't care. She knew what was in that Room. She knew that her father—or some kind of ghost of him—wasn't there.

I snatch the device from her hand. "What happens if I break this thing?"

"Don't," my father says, but he's not scared. He is looking at my face, not at the device in my hand.

I turn and toss it to Mikk. He catches it, looking surprised. He holds it as if it burns him, even though it's cool to the touch.

Then I advance on my father. "Tell me what's really going on here."

"You were supposed to go in," he says.

"I did," I say. "I went in and recovered my friend."

"He's like almost mummified," Roderick says, his voice shaking. "What does that?"

My father looks at me, then looks at Riya. She is staring at Roderick.

"They both went in?" she asks. "Together?"

"The boss already told you," Mikk says. "She had to recover his body. He went in alone. It was a smart dive move. He was going to map everything. He thought he'd be clearer headed than everyone else."

"You shouldn't have allowed it," my father says.

"Maybe if I'd had all the information, I wouldn't have," I say. "What aren't you two telling me? Besides the fact that you knew the Room was empty."

"It's not our fault," Riya says. "You didn't listen."

"I listened," I say. "You wanted us to recover your father. You wanted me to treat it like I would treat any other wreck, and your father would be salvage. That's what you offered. You came to me because I'd gotten out of the Room before and you figured I wouldn't be scared to wear the device. . . ."

My voice trails off as I listen to what I had just said. *I had gotten out of the Room before.* That's why they hired me. Not because of the device. Not because of her father.

Because I had escaped once before.

"The device doesn't work, does it?" I ask. "It's just pretty lights and nothing more."

"No," my father says, but Mikk takes the device and rips it apart. He takes out the center piece, the part I couldn't quite place, and stomps on it.

The lights still run along the outer edge of the frame.

"Son of a bitch," he says.

Roderick takes the device, turns it over, then crouches and looks at the pieces on the floor of the bay. Whatever that circle piece was, it was solid. There were no component parts, nothing that built into an engine or a chip.

"What were you people thinking?" he asks my father and Riya. "Why did you do this?"

"You were testing something else, weren't you?" I'm looking at my father. "This is something to do with your business, not with Mother, isn't it?"

He doesn't answer. He takes a step back. His cheeks flush.

"The others who went in, the ones you say tested the device, they're all survivors too, aren't they?" I ask.

Riya looks at my father again.

"I thought I was the only one still alive," I say.

My father is staring at me.

"But there are others, aren't there? And you found them. You sent them in. And they came out again. Didn't they?"

I take a step toward Riya and I let her see how angry I really am.

"Didn't they?" I ask again.

"Yes," she says.

"With a fake device. A handful of us can come and go as we please, can't we?"

"Yes," my father says.

"Why didn't you just tell us?" I ask.

"Would you have gone in then?" Riya asks.

"What does my getting into that Room prove?"

"That some of us can do it," my father says. "Some of us are designed to survive."

*He clings to me. His helmet hits mine, and a crack appears along my visor. He covers it with his gloved hand and I can hear his voice in our comm system: Hurry, hurry, I think her suit is compromised.*

*He holds me so tight I can't breathe. We go through the door back to the single ship someone has brought and they stuff me inside. My dad can barely fit beside me. He checks the environmental system in the single ship, then pulls off my helmet and shoves a breather in my mouth.*

C'mon, baby, c'mon, he says, don't die on me now.

*My lungs hurt. My body aches. I look up at him and he's terrified. He keeps glancing out the porthole at the Room.*

I had no idea, he says. I didn't know or I wouldn't have let her go in there. I certainly wouldn't have let her bring you.

*But I can't think about it. I can't think about any of it. The hum is too loud, the voices echoing in my head. I close my eyes, and I refuse to think about it. About the way she stopped talking, the way her hand slipped from mine, the way her faceplate shattered as her body slammed into the wall.*

*Then I wrapped my arms around my knees, waiting. My daddy would come. I knew he would come.*

*I stayed there for what seemed like days, listening to the voices, feeling my mother's body brush against mine, as she got older and thinner and more and more horrible.*

*There were no lights. Just the glimmer of her helmet light through my tears. And that faded.*

*Finally I couldn't look any more. I closed my eyes and wondered when the voices would get me.*

*Then my father grabbed me and pulled me out.*

*And I was safe.*

I look at him now. His eyes are wide. He has made a verbal slip and he knows it.

"My God," I say. "You know what's in there."

"Honey," my father says. "Don't."

I turn to Roderick and Mikk. "Go get the others. Bring a stretcher so that we can take Karl out of here with some dignity."

"I don't think we should leave you here," Mikk says. He's catching onto this quicker than Roderick.

"I'll be fine," I say. "Just hurry back."

They head to the door. Riya watches them go. My father keeps looking at me.

"You tell me what you know," I say, "Or I'm going to have the authorities come get both of you for fraud and murder. You clearly brought us out here on false pretenses, and now a man is dead."

Karl is dead. My heart aches.

"Call them," Riya says. "They won't care. Our contract is with them."

My father closes his eyes.

I look from him to her. "For stealth tech. This is all about stealth tech."

"That's right," she says. "You're one of the lucky few who can work in its fields without risks."

Lucky few. Me and a handful of others, all of whom were conned by this woman and my father. For what? A government military contract?

"What are you trying to do?" I ask. "Consign us to some government hell hole?"

My father has opened his eyes. He's shaking his head.

"No, you're just the test subjects," Riya says, apparently oblivious to my tone. "Before they approved our project, they wanted to make sure everyone who got out before could get out again. You were the last one. Your father didn't think you would work with us, but I proved him wrong."

"I signed on to help you recover your father," I say to her.

She shrugs one shoulder. "I never knew him. I really don't care about him. And you were right. I already knew he wasn't in that Room. But I figured telling you about him would work. I'm not the only one in this bay who was abandoned by her father."

My father puts a hand to his forehead. I haven't moved.

"I thought this was an historical project," I say, maybe too defensively. "I thought this was a job, like the kind I used to do."

"That's what you were supposed to think," she says. "Only you weren't supposed to send someone else into the Room. You're the only one with the marker."

Marker. As in genetic marker. I turn to my father.

"That's what you meant by designed. I'm some kind of test subject. I have some kind of genetic modification."

"No," he says. "Or yes. Or I'm not sure. You see, we think that anyone sent out on a Dignity Vessel had to have been bred or genetically modified to work around stealth tech. Then the ships got stranded and the Dignity crews left them and mingled with the rest of the population. Some of us have the marker. You do. I do. Your mother didn't."

He says that last with some pain. He still grieves for her. I don't doubt that. But somehow he got mixed up in this.

"There were no Dignity Vessels this far out," I say. "They weren't designed to travel huge distances, and they weren't manufactured outside of Earth's solar system."

"Don't insult my intelligence," he says. "We know you found a Dignity Vessel a few years ago. I've seen it."

Because I salvaged it and got paid for it. I couldn't leave it in space, a deathtrap to whoever else wandered close to it.

Like this Room is.

I salvaged the vessel and gave it to the government so they could study the damn stealth tech.

And now my father has seen the vessel.

"That's how I knew how to find you," he says.

"You didn't need me," I say. "You had the others."

"We needed all of you," Riya says. "The government wouldn't give us a

go unless we had a one hundred percent success rate. Which we do. Your friend Karl simply proves that those who go in need the marker or they're subject to the interdimensional field."

Karl and Junior and my mother and who knows how many others.

"How long has the government known?" I ask. "How long have they known that the Room is a stealth-tech generator?"

She shrugs. "Why does it matter?"

"Because they should have shut it down." I'm even closer to her than I was before. She's backing away from me.

"They can't," my father says. "They don't know how."

"Then they should have blocked off the station," I say. "This place is dangerous."

"There are centuries' worth of warnings to keep people away," Riya says. "Besides, it's not our concern. We have scientists who can replicate that marker. We think we've finally discovered a way to work with real stealth tech. Do you know what that's worth?"

"My life, apparently," I say. "And my mother's. And Karl's."

Riya is looking at me. She's finally understanding how angry I am.

"Don't," my father says.

"Don't what?" I ask. "Don't hurt her? Why should you care? I could have died in there. Me, the daughter you swore to protect. Or did you abandon that oath along with your search for my mother? Was that even real?"

"It was real, honey," he says. "That's how I found out about this. Riya and I met at a survivors' meeting. We started talking—"

"I don't care!" I snap. "Don't you understand what you've done?"

"You wouldn't have died," he says. "That's why we approached you last. Once we were sure the others made it out, then we came to you. Besides, you've done much more dangerous things on your own."

"And so has Karl." I'm close to both of them now. I'm so angry, I'm trembling. "But you know what the difference is?"

My father shakes his head. Riya watches me as if she's suddenly realized how dangerous I can be.

"The difference is that we chose to take those risks," I say. "We didn't choose this one."

"I heard you tell the team," Riya says, "that someone might die on this mission."

"I always tell my teams that," I say. "It makes them vigilant."

"But this time you believed it," my father says.

"Yeah," I say softly. "I thought that someone would be me."

And that's the crux of it. I know it as soon as I say it. I thought I would die on this mission and, apparently, I was fine with that.

I thought I'd die in multicolored lights and song, like I thought my mother had died, and I thought it a beautiful way to go. I'd even convinced myself that I would die diving, so it would be all right.

I would be done.

But it's not all right. Karl's dead, and I can't even prove fault, except my own. Only when I review the decisions we made, we made the right ones with the information we had.



The thought brings me up short, prevents me from slamming Riya or my father against the bay wall.

Somehow I get out of that bay without harming either of them.

I don't speak to them as the *Business* leaves the station. I don't speak to them until I drop them at the nearest outpost. Then I expressly tell them that if they contact me or my people again, I will find a way to hurt them—but I don't know exactly how I would do that.

Riya's right. The government would back them because they're working on a secret and important project. Stealth tech is the holy grail of military research. So she and my father can get away with anything.

And—stupid me—I finally realize that my father has no feelings for me at all. He never has. The clinging I remember is just him pulling me free of the Room, leaving my mother—my poor mother—behind.

I can't even guarantee that we weren't part of some early experiment on the same project. While my father was telling my mother's parents to care for me while he tried to recover her, he might have been simply trying to recoup his losses from that trip, experimenting with people and markers and things that survive in the strangest of interdimensional fields.

After we leave my father and Riya on the outpost, we have a memorial service for Karl. I talk the longest because I knew him the best, and I don't cry until we send him out into the darkness, still in his suit with his knife and breathers.

He would have wanted those. He would have appreciated the caution, even though it was caution—in the end—that got him killed.

As we head back to Longbow Station, I have decided to resuscitate my business. Only I'm not going to wreck dive like I used to. I'm going to find Dignity Vessels. I'm going to capture anything that vaguely resembles stealth tech and I'm going to find a place to keep it where our government can't get it.

I'm going to run a shadow project. I'm going to find out how this stuff works and I'm going to do it before the government does because I won't have to follow the regulations.

The government and the people like my father, they have to follow certain rules and protocols, all the while keeping the project secret.

I won't have to. If I go far enough out of the sector, I won't have to follow any rules at all.

I can make my own. Change the way the battle is fought. Redefine the war.

I learned that from Ewing Trekov. Don't fight the war you're given; fight the war you can envision.

Once the government has stealth tech, they'll have a seemingly invincible military. They'll be stronger in ways that can hurt the smaller governments in the region and anyone who works at the edges of the law, like I do.

But if we have stealth tech too, then all sides are equal. And if we can figure out how to use that tech in ways they haven't imagined, then we get ahead.

All my life, I searched the past for my purpose. I sensed that something back there opened the key to my future.

Who knew that I would find all that I'd lost in the one place that had taken everything from me.

There are no souls in that Room, just like there are no voices.

There's only the harshness of time.

And like the ancients before me, I'm going to harness that harshness into a weapon, a defense, and a future.

I don't know what I'm going to do with it.

Maybe I'll just wait, and let the future reveal itself like the habitats on the station, one small section at a time. ○

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## THE MULTIVERSE

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**IN WAR TIMES**

by Kathleen Ann Goonan

Tor, \$25.95

ISBN: 1597800457

**BRASYL**

by Ian McDonald

Pyr, \$25.00

ISBN: 0345478258

It seems to happen at irregular intervals, in different journals, written by different writers, with somewhat differing slants, but it's always the same old bollocks, because it's always based on the same misconception. The latest incarnation, in *Discovery Magazine*, is "Blinded by Science: Fictional Reality," by one Bruno Maddox.

Don't stop me if you've heard this before, because of course you have, it's one more screed about how the accelerating pace of science and technology has overtaken and surpassed science fiction; "Sci-fi helped make the present; now it's obsolete," as the slug line puts it.

It's the usual such stuff, if more scientifically ignorant than most. It is framed with an amusing, well-written, and mildly devastating con report on the scene at the last Nebula event in New York, but it descends to silly stuff like:

"In the real world, quantum foam is a term used by hard-core physi-

cists standing beside vast, cantilevered chalkboards full of squiggles to describe a theoretical state, or scale, or reality at which particles of time and space blink in and out of existence in a soup of their own mathematical justification. But in (Michael) Crichton's hands, it's actual foam. His heroes step into their time machine, pass quickly through a metaphysical car wash of suds, and then spend the rest of the novel jousting with black-armored knights and rolling under descending portcullises. The science, in other words, is pure nonsense, and the science fiction is not so much 'hard' or 'soft' as what you might call, well, 'bad.'"

So much for cutting edge quantum physics!

My point in quoting Maddox here is not to attack (or for that matter defend) Crichton's literary use of what quantum physics, so ignorantly pooh-poohed by him, more and more is telling us is the actual nature of physical reality, but to make a different literary point upon which Maddox is even more abysmally misguided. This is not at all disconnected from the scientific point, and is intended to refute something that James Gunn said in the Paraliteraria on-line forum, a refutation that I don't think Jim Gunn will mind at all.

I doubt that very many people reading this magazine need to be told that it is quite impossible for science to render science fiction "obsolete," let alone for the "reality" of the present to do so. But perhaps a

clarifying image might be in order, of the simple sort that might even enlighten the likes of Bruno Maddox as to why this is so and why he is dead wrong.

Picture the sincere writer of serious science fiction—someone really trying to do the job—as standing in the bow of a boat in a moment we might call the present. The boat is human history and all scientific knowledge available in that moment, and the waters that the boat is sailing through is the ocean of time. The science fiction writer is riding the vessel of all that knowledge, and his or her mission is to peer ahead from that vantage into the fog-bank of the future ahead of the boat utilizing all the knowledge upon which he or she stands, “stands on the shoulders of giants,” as this sort of thing is often put.

Thus, while the accumulation of scientific and other forms of knowledge as well as the profusion of technological innovation may be accelerating as the boat sails forward through the sea of time, no matter how fast it goes, no matter how much cargo is accumulating in the hold, *the science fiction writer is always standing in the bow of the boat looking forward.*

That is why it is impossible for science, technology, evolution, or history to render science fiction obsolete. There are all too many ways that a civilization can end up destroying science fiction as a commercially viable literature or even as a visionary mode of thought, but the necessary visionary function performed by science fiction in a progressively evolving civilization can never be rendered obsolete. If nothing is performing that visionary function, it is the civilization in question that in the end renders *itself* obsolete, as has happened many times in world history.

Simple, right? If you're reading this magazine, you probably knew all that already.

However. . .

However, I came across a discussion of Maddox's article in the Paraliteraria forum in which no one really agreed with such nonsense, but there seemed to emerge a consensus that science fiction had not dealt with or introduced any “Big New Ideas” in a long time. James Gunn declared that *Neuromancer*, way back in the 1980s, was the last work of science fiction to do so, but that he still had hope.

You can relax, Jim, there are two of them, and they are both a lot bigger and far more drastic than “cyberspace.”

The lesser one—and lesser it is only by comparison to the greater one which will be the main topic of this essay—is Vernor Vinge's concept of the “Singularity,” which he has promulgated and explored in articles, interviews, scholarly papers, and his own science fiction, and which has been picked up by enough other science fiction writers to have become something of a fixture of the genre.

Chez Vinge, technology, particularly computer and software technology, is proceeding at such a rapid and rapidly accelerating pace that sooner or later Artificial Intelligences will be created by humans that will be capable of creating Artificial Intelligences superior to themselves, which will create the next generation of AIs. And so on and so forth, Artificial Intelligence raising itself by its own virtual bootstraps generation after rapid-fire generation exponentially until there arises a generation of AIs not only far advanced beyond human intelligence, not only forever beyond mere hu-

man understanding, but advancing to a point where they somehow transcend naturally evolved reality to create a virtual reality that is even more "real." This they will inhabit and continue to evolve within at an ever-increasing rate, and in it humans will at best be honored pets or at worst disappear entirely.

The Singularity. The creation of a level of reality where humans can never go.

I have had my dialectical arguments with this concept, but neither I nor anyone else can seriously argue that the Singularity is not a "Big New Idea" emerging in and from science fiction. Whether it's inevitable in real world terms or not, it is certainly a most puissant literary trope that has generated, is generating, and no doubt will continue to generate, interesting and significant science fiction. We can argue about it, but no one in their right mind can say that it is trivial.

But even the Singularity as an engine for the generation of works of science fiction and the thematic revitalization of the literature pales beside the greater of the "Big New Ideas" in question which may, among even greater things, in the end prove also to be its dialectic antithesis.

The Multiverse.

Okay, in purely fictional terms, the Multiverse, the idea that there is no such thing as a single fixed base reality, but rather a multiplexity of subjective realities, each of which is "equally real" or "unreal," is not exactly a new idea, being the central theme of the work of Philip K. Dick, and, in literary terms at least, the necessary premise of the alternate world story, among other things.

Indeed, despite all the alternate world stories that have been written

afterward and the few that were written before, it is Dick's classic novel of a world in which the Nazis and the Japanese won World War II, and the alternate reality within it in which they didn't, *The Man in the High Castle*, which really opened the door for the alternate history story as a sub-set of "science fiction"—as well, in a way, at least in literary terms, for a certain kind of "fantasy" as a subset of "SF."

In literary terms, science fiction, or speculative fiction if you will, is by definition the literature of the could-be-but-isn't, and fantasy by definition is the literature of the demonstrably impossible. The alternate history story takes place in a region between, a fictional reality in which the laws of mass and energy may be the same as in our own, but which never "happened."

But when Mr. Tagomi, in *The Man in the High Castle*, has a vision of, or is transported to, *our* world for a time, Dick introduces the powerful fictional concept that *both* worlds, and by extension others as well, could simultaneously "happen," could be equally "real" by some elusive definition.

And thereby introduces the Multiverse as science fiction, rather than fantasy.

This, it could certainly have been argued up until fairly recently, is a strictly literary game irrelevant to anything but literary definition, and fantasy could just as well be defined as fiction set in alternate worlds where the physical laws are different, so that what we call "magic" works like a technology; worlds, which like alternate histories, just happen to have never "happened."

And, indeed, something like Justina Robson's *Keeping It Real* is a "Multiverse" novel of sorts which

reads more like science fiction than fantasy, even though it's full of elves, demons, elementals, and all sorts of well-worn fantasy tropes, including various species of magic.

The set-up is that a technological artifact called a Quantum Bomb (an interesting choice of label right there) has breached the barriers between several alternate universes including our own, each with different laws of physics or magic, releasing such literarily conventional fantasy creatures into the human realm and, to a more limited extent, humans into theirs.

But whether Robson consciously intended to declare it or not when she titled the novel, keeping it real is just what *Keeping It Real* does, the "it" being that this Multiverse is literarily science fiction, not fantasy. Each of these alternate realities has its own more or less rigorous physical laws, call what's going on magic or not. When beings from one of them travel to another, humans included, the mix of realities is complexly and believably rendered. One of the lead characters is a male elf come to our world to become a rock star. The other is his female cyborged bodyguard.

Fantasy written as if it were science fiction. Like alternate-history fiction.

*Just like alternate-history fiction.*

There is quite a bit of this sort of fantasy being written these days, perhaps because there's only so much you can do with the usual high fantasy and traditional horror characters and tropes and great reams of it have already been written. Or perhaps because, though fantasy has come to dominate the "SF" genre, there is arising a generation of newer writers not particularly interested in things technological or scientific but pos-

sessed of more of a hard-edged private eye, rock-and-roll, underground, and, well, punkish, sensibility and angle of attack than what the unkind might deem airy-fairy. Science fiction with a fantasy face, you might say, or just as well fantasy with a science fictional attitude.

In the marketplace, science fiction and fantasy have long since come to inhabit the same commercial multiverse encompassed by the "SF" logo and rackspace. And it may be that the literary concept of the Multiverse might be bringing them closer esthetically, at least stylistically and in terms of angle of attack.

But not in terms of what cutting edge physics is now telling us about the true nature of, well, ultimate reality. For what quantum physics is now telling us is that the Multiverse is the ultimate reality, and not merely a literary construct. That a multiplicity of separate universes or realities *must* exist because of quantum indeterminacy. And not just a multiplicity, but an infinite number of universes branching out fractally from every moment of time, and with an infinity of our alternate selves exfoliated within them.

This now seems to be turning out to be the true nature of existence(s), however paradoxical and counterintuitive that may seem to our aching minds when we attempt to encompass it experientially. It is science which has fed science fiction an enormous morsel to attempt to chew on this time, and not the other way around. The Multiverse, it would appear, is not merely subjective perception, but the way things really are, the way our selves really are, our alternate selves, the truth of all existence on a quantum level.

To deal with this fictionally with anything like rigor, let alone convey



it to the reader on an experiential and emotional level, is one daunting and even frightening task. But it is also a rich vein of thematic and speculative material only beginning to be mined on that level.

Just as my extended nautical metaphor demolishes Maddox's contention that science and technology have, or even could, render science fiction obsolete, so does the frontier of quantum cosmology physics render my conceit of the science fiction writer as standing in the bow of a boat moving through the sea of time and gazing through the fog into the future a gross oversimplification.

For every quantum of time through which the boat moves generates an infinite number of avatars of that "single" science fiction writer within an infinite number of universes radiating out from it, and that's only the timeline of "one" person. Multiply that by the population of the planet, and then multiply *that* by the interaction of all these interacting personal universes, and you get . . . you get. . . .

You maybe get a *transfinite* number of universes, and while there is such a thing as transfinite mathematics, I freely confess that such a mathematical construct is beyond my understanding. Anyway, I seriously doubt that even transfinite mathematics can begin to convey the experiential reality.

And yet physics, at least currently, seems to be telling us that this is the true existential nature of ultimate reality. And even if that concept should be overthrown later, it is certainly a Big Enough Idea to severely challenge the literary powers of science fiction writers for quite a while. Maybe permanently.

As I've said, science fiction writers have been using the Multiverse, the

concept of alternate realities, alternate histories, since Philip K. Dick wrote *The Man in the High Castle*. And, indeed, in a way long before, since the hoary old time travel paradox story is a sort of subset of the same thing, or at least couldn't exist without assuming it.

But attempts to put the reader inside anything much like the kind of Multiverse that physics is now telling us is probably the real deal have been few and far between, and no wonder. The full scientific explication is not only rather recent, but seems almost impossible to fully wrap the human mind around on any but a theoretical level.

How to describe what would be the true state of being of characters in a situation where each of them, far from being singular, is an infinite clade of iterations in an infinite (or transfinite?) set of isolated universes, each slightly different from the next? Let alone put together a coherent story in which several of them interact!

Kathleen Ann Goonan begins to inch up to it in *In War Times*, an excellent novel, though there are sections where it becomes somewhat tediously over-discursive, perhaps because the author is a bit too entranced with her own formidable recreation of the period. Or perhaps this is a necessary flaw, for to succeed it has to be two different sorts of novel in one.

On one level, *In War Times* is a World War II historical novel, that follows the main protagonist Sam and his buddy Wink from the death of Sam's brother in the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor through the whole war and onto into the Allied, and particularly American, occupation of Germany afterward, and beyond. Needless to say, there have probably been thousands of World

War II novels written by now, but even this non-science fictional aspect of *In War Times* is interestingly (mostly) different from a lot, if not all, of them.

For one thing, while Sam and Wink do see some combat, their war is mostly that of behind the lines technical and logistical support troops, and few writers have chosen to narrate World War II novels from that perspective. And for another, Sam and Wink stay on after the end of World War II as part of the occupying forces in Germany, something that Goonan goes into in interesting if sometimes excessive detail—a scene and story not exactly overly exploited in the mountain of World War II literature.

Kathleen Goonan was of course not there. But in an afterword, she explains that her father was—that although the character of Sam is not based on him, Sam's trajectory through the war and into the occupation follows Thomas Goonan's in terms of deployments, and that he actually wrote some small sections of the novel that are true accounts of his experiences. Furthermore, his daughter obviously had access to his memories as a further resource.

The happy result is that *In War Times* evokes the times and places with a depth of reality that is pretty damn masterful. Or at least it seems so to someone like me, who likewise has no way to compare Goonan's recreation of the 1940s and a bit beyond with personal memories of the historical reality, whose only points of comparison are the films of the time, the cinematic recreations, some tales told by my own father, and a very small boy's fragmentary memories of life in New York while my father was in the Navy.

But in literary terms, the accuracy

of what Kathleen Goonan has created doesn't really matter, because the times and places she recreates (or creates) in *In War Times* are utterly convincing not only in wealth of cultural and pop cultural detail, not only in sensual evocation, but somehow in the very attitude of the period.

Indeed, sometimes the evocation of the period and places seems a bit overdone, to the point where it slows down the story and has this reader, at least, wishing she would get on with it. But on the other hand, this grounding of the novel in the retro, somewhat clunky, almost dimly remembered milieu of the 1940s, entirely accurate or not, a bit overdone or not, seems necessary to making the science fiction novel both within and surrounding the historical aspect work as well as it does.

Sam enlists after the death of his beloved brother at Pearl Harbor and spends the rest of the war and beyond nursing the fantasy of somehow undoing the reality of his brother's death. Sam is a kind of nuts and bolts and wiring techie guy, not really a warrior, and his war is spent working with, repairing, improvising, and tinkering with the new technology being slung together under the pressure of wartime—clunky steampunk or vacuumtubepunk feeling stuff to the contemporary reader, but gee-whiz at the time.

Much of this military gadgetry is the real thing of the time, rendered in a manner that would easily enough satisfy John W. Campbell. But not the McGuffin of the novel. Sam is seduced by a mysterious and enigmatic female physicist who gives him somewhat incomplete plans for an even more mysterious and enigmatic device that will somehow end the war, or end the human predilection for war, or . . . or something. . .

Sam, wizard electronic tinkerer on the then-current vacuum tube level that is spawning things like radar and devices leading to the earliest computers, spends the rest of the war and beyond trying to build this thing, then trying to perfect it, at times with the aid of Wink. While doing his duties, he meets Bette, also a woman of mystery, who will become the love of his life.

It takes quite a while for him to more or less begin to figure out what the thing is supposed to do and what it actually does. These are not quite the same things, particularly since the gizmo's physical nature keeps changing as Sam tinkers with it, or for that matter even when he doesn't and keeps it hidden.

It appears that the device somehow changes the world as it changes itself, or warps Sam into alternate worlds where Bette, the mysterious physicist, and Wink themselves change personas, histories, names, where world histories mutate—giving Sam the hope that he can somehow change the world into one where his brother is still alive, or warp himself into such a world, or . . .

Well, in light of all the previous discussion of the Multiverse, you at least can see where Goonan is taking this. Even if Sam can't quite understand except on a basic phenomenological level, even if the author can't quite go all the way there herself, since this is all taking place in a time period (or time periods) when the concept of ultimate reality as an infinite number of universes branching out fractally from every moment of time, and with an infinity of our alternate selves exfoliated within them, could not have even been a gleam in contemporary physics' eye.

Kathleen Ann Goonan can't overtly broach that concept in *In War*

*Times*, since this is a period piece the maintenance of whose grounding in this wartime and early post-war-time past is absolutely essential for the novel to work. But she herself, writing in the present, does seem to comprehend it at least up to a point, and sidles up to it, using the progressive jazz of the period as an extended musical metaphor for the physics and metaphysics of the Multiverse.

Sam and Wink are dedicated fans of progressive jazz and good amateur performers thereof, too. There are numerous long sections where Goonan conveys their presence in the audiences for some of the real jazz geniuses of the age, their own jams, even the occasional jams with a great or two. She does not do this on a superficial level, either. She conveys the depths, passions, musicological nature, and psychic realities of all these improvisations on themes, and builds them all into a grand analogy for the workings of the Multiverse.

It's a brilliant ploy, using the jazz of the era to bring the period piece and science fictional natures of the novel together, while approaching an explication of the nature of mutable multiversal reality on a heartfelt and beautifully portrayed musical level.

As Goonan herself puts it in her afterword:

"I have likened the evolution of modern jazz . . . to the creative ferment in science that has led to our ever-growing understanding of the world, nature, and ourselves. . . . We can never revisit the original luminous thoughts of Charlie Parker as he and Dizzy Gillespie birthed a new art form. In reality, the physicists, chemists, and biologists of the nineteenth and twentieth century birthed modernity and its reflection and interpretation in literature, art, and

music. Our art and our science are inextricably linked."

Well spoken!

However . . .

However, while Kathleen Ann Goonan has taken it as far as anyone save Ian McDonald, who we will get to shortly, like everyone else, she has not fully been able to make fiction portray the full consequences of the quantum multiverse. For while physicists of the nineteenth and twentieth century may have indeed birthed modernity and its reflection in literature, art, and music, in the twenty-first century they seem to have birthed a concept which, if true, or even if not, music, art, and literature, are going to have a hard time conveying to the human mind on an experiential, emotional, and spiritual level.

Just trying to encompass it on a theoretical level beyond the mathematical gives one an existential headache. Think about it head-on if you dare. Return to my metaphor of the science fiction writer standing in the bow of a boat moving forward through the ocean of time. Only now it's *you* standing there, dear reader.

Every infinitesimal unit of time through which the boat moves generates another avatar of *you*, a *you* in another timeline in another universe, an infinite number of slightly different *yous*, each in a slightly different universe, each in turn generating more *yous* in more universes, an infinite number of them radiating from each instant like a fractal explosion.

So who are you? Where are you? What are you?

Paradoxically, cutting edge human science would seem to have come up with a model of reality that not merely violates what the human mind perceives of as the space-time

matrix in which it exists, but which violates human consciousness' perception of the nature of its own existence.

It's obvious that humans just don't have the sensory equipment to perceive this ultimate level of reality. And we may not have the mental software to deal with it directly if we did. Which may be *why* we have evolved without the means to perceive it. Because if we did. . . .

What?

What happens if science proves that, contrary to our experience and perception, this is really the way things are, which is certainly within the realm of possibility?

What if we *know* something we can't possibly *understand*? What if each of us, our bodies, our consciousnesses, truly exist as infinite and infinitesimally different iterations, each in an infinitesimally different universe, and none of them able to interact with any other?

Can music bring this one home to human experiential understanding?

Seems to me it would take something like an infinite number of Bachs writing an infinite number of fugues, each with an infinite number of harmonically interacting melody lines.

Can visual art?

Marcel Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase" maybe approaches it at right angles. Take a look at it sometime. An abstract figure descending an abstract staircase, rendered as if it were a series of connected still shots taken rapidly, each strobe-flowing into the next, so that Duchamps has succeeded in actually painting the passage of time as an immobile image on canvas. View it instead as a human attractor radiating iterations into the Multiverse, and maybe you've got something.

But it would seem that it is the job of fiction in general, and science fiction in particular, to use language to actually create the virtual experience of multiversal reality in the human mind. Is this even remotely possible?

Well, in *Brasyl*, Ian McDonald comes pretty damn close. Arguably, he may even have succeeded.

Why the strange spelling of the country's name as the title? Maybe because the obvious title *Brasils* would have been giving too much away. Or not. In any case, there's no way to discuss this novel without saying that it's about three different Brasils. At least.

Timewise, there are three Brasils in this novel.

There is a story thread set in a Brazil of the very near future centered on Marcellina Hoffman. Hoffman is a trash reality TV producer searching for the man who cost soccer-mad Brazil a World Cup for the purpose of resurrecting her damaged career by tormenting him on television to produce a hit reality show.

There is a Brazil of the 2030s where Edson, a street-entrepreneur con-man type, likewise and always in search of the Big Score, falls in love with Fia, a quantum computer hacker.

There is a Brazil of the colonial past in the 1700s, in which Father Luis Quinn is sent deep up the Amazon into its heart of darkness in search of a Kurtzlike apostate cult leader.

For much of the novel, these three threads seem like three entirely different stories centered on three entirely different casts of characters, which just as well could have been extracted separately and published as three novellas. Marcellina tracks the man who blew the World Cup through the mondes and demimon-

des of something close to contemporary Brazil, Edson chases after the elusive and increasingly mysterious Fia three decades later, Father Quinn delves deeper and deeper into the tribal mysteries of the Amazon rainforest in the colonial past.

As with *River of Gods*, only here triply so, Ian McDonald has managed to bring alive not just the future culture and technosphere of a country unfamiliar to the western reader of science fiction, but its popular culture, mystical inner life, style, and rhythm, and in the case of *Brasyl*, its deep history, too.

If that was all there was to *Brasyl*, it would still be more than enough to confirm McDonald as one of the most interesting and accomplished science fiction writers of this latter-day era. Indeed, maybe *the* most interesting and accomplished, and certainly the most culturally and musically sophisticated—the Frank Herbert, William Gibson, or arguably even Thomas Pynchon of the early twenty-first century, if only the early twenty-first century would allow such a writer to reach that kind of eminence.

But there is much more to *Brasyl* than the intercutting of three bravura novellas set in three different eras in the same Brazil. Slowly, the story lines of Marcellina, Edson, and Quinn begin to converge, and in unconventional manners.

Without, I hope, giving too much away, when Marcellina finds her fallen soccer star, now an old man, he is the shaman of a cult whose sacrament is the hallucinogenic exudate of an Amazon frog. This frog was likewise the center of the mystical life of a strange tribe in Father Quinn's timeline, and some sort of doppelganger of Marcellina has begun to haunt her in hers. Edson's

quantum hacker Fia becomes lost to him, and then returns, but doesn't seem to be quite the same person, and they are pursued by assassins from somewhere or somewhen whose major weapons are blades sharpened down to the quantum level so that they can literally cut through anything, and—

Best to stop there in order not to give away too much story. Save to say that the exudate of the frog is not really a hallucinogen, but something analogous to the quantum blade and powerful enough that quantum computers do much the same thing as it does.

Which in the case of the hardware tech is to open doorways between the alternate universes of the Multiverse through which people may pass from one to another, through which avatars of the same person may pass from one to another, so that more than one of them may even appear in the same reality.

And what the exudate of the frog can do for those who can handle it, or perhaps even for some who can't, is something far, far beyond even that.

It transports one's consciousness into direct perception of the total Multiverse itself, into a surfer through the quantum probability waves of one's own avatars in the universes within it. Here the only route to cohesive sanity is transcendence, the ability to perceive and inhabit the Multiverse entire, and the ability to choose one probability wave of self as the attractor and collapse the rest down onto it at will, to become, as McDonald puts it, Our Lady of All Worlds, able to traverse them all.

And Ian McDonald actually does it. He succeeds in putting a human face on, putting a human consciousness within, the naked quantum Multi-

verse, the infinite multiplicity of universes branching out fractally from every moment of time, with the infinity of her alternate selves exfoliating within it, and delivering the experience to the reader.

Well maybe only almost.

Or not.

Our Lady of All Worlds does not fully remain a surfer of the probability waves of her own selves forever, although by the logic of things she could. Even Ian McDonald is not ready to try to narrate very long sections of a novel through a consciousness like that! Our Lady of All Worlds collapses the probability waves of herself into singular iterations in singular universes for story purposes. And perhaps to render coherent narration even possible.

But who knows, perhaps that's what we all do without being conscious of doing it, each and every one of our infinite numbers of selves in the infinite number of separate universes collapsing the probability waves onto a different attractor in each and every one of them and thus thereby calling them into being.

Science has rendered science fiction obsolete, now has it?

There have been no Big Ideas since Cyberspace?

I hardly think there is or has been a scientific concept or a science fictional idea larger than that of the theoretical Multiverse presented to us by physics, and opened up by Ian McDonald in *Brasyl* in literary terms as something to be explored as a state of being. As what may truly be the existential state of of truly awakened being in the Multiverse.

And if so, if every probability wave collapses onto an attractor of the possible to create a separate universe of the Multiverse, if everything that can happen does happen in



some of them but not in others, if every possible version of every possible being is a probability wave in the Multiverse, is this not the quantum refutation of the previously most recent Big Idea, Vernor Vinge's concept of the Singularity because it obviates the very concept of singularity itself?

And if arguably not, is this not the literary material for a great scientific, mystic, psychic, and literary dialectic?

A science fictional dialectic, that is, for what other mode of literature can even begin to approach such material?

Hold off on the funeral arrangements, Mr. Maddox.

Fret not, Jim Gunn.

Welcome to the next Big Idea!

It's a doozie, now ain't it?

Welcome to the opening act of the science fiction of the twenty-first century. O

## DEATHS ON OTHER PLANETS

Vacuum seal burst.

Uncontrolled cellular mutation.

Cancer presumably caused by radiation overdose.

Multiple stab wounds from metal claws.

Drowning.

Starvation.

Dehydration.

Oxygen poisoning.

Overgrown with mold.

Hiccups.

Eyestalk hemorrhage after hovercraft accident.

Narrative necessity.

Influenza.

Robot rebellion.

Strangled with own tentacles.

Crushed by weight of own cranium.

Beaten to pulp by human children at play;  
sun-dried and washed out to sea.

—Joanne Merriam

# SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

**S**wing into spring with a full lineup of conventions in March and April (even one where I'm Guest of Honor!). Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 5 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

## MARCH 2008

7-9—**AllCon**. For info, write: Box 177194, Irving TX 75019. Or phone: (817) 472-6369 (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). (Web) [all-con.org](http://all-con.org). (E-mail) [info@all-con.org](mailto:info@all-con.org). Con will be held near Dallas TX (if city omitted, same as in address) at venue to be announced. Guests will include: none announced. Autographs, gaming, comics, and a burlesque show.

14-16—**LunaCon**. [lunacon.org](http://lunacon.org). Hilton, Rye NY (near NYC). J. Carey, J.Y. Klukas, J.D. Sicari, W.A. Howlett.

14-16—**StellarCon**. [stellarcon.org](http://stellarcon.org). Radisson, High Point NC. Toni Weisskopf, M.M. Moore, Zahn, Stackpole, McDevitt.

14-16—**MillenniCon**. (513) 659-2558 [millennicon.org](http://millennicon.org). Cincinnati OH. S. Barnes, T. Due, Tom Smith, Mark Kantlehner.

14-16—**OmegaCon**. [omegacon.us](http://omegacon.us). Sheraton, Birmingham AL. Ben Bova, Alan Dean Foster, David Drake, Steven Brust.

14-16—**RevelCon**. [severalunlimited.com/revelcon](http://severalunlimited.com/revelcon). Houston TX. Low-key relax-a-con for adult media fanzines.

20-23—**Int'l. Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts**. [icfa.org](http://icfa.org). V. Vinge, Gilman, Lockhurst. Academic conference.

20-23—**NorwesCon**, Box 68547, Seattle WA 98168. (206) 270-7850. [norwescon.org](http://norwescon.org). Seattle WA. Dan. Simmons, Ciruelo.

21-23—**MiniCon**, Box 8297, Minneapolis MN 55408. [mnstf.org](http://mnstf.org). Minneapolis MN area. Reynolds, Barlowe, S. McCarthy.

21-23—**Anime Boston**, Box 1843, New York NY 10150. [animeboston.com](http://animeboston.com). Hynes Convention Center, Boston MA. Huge.

21-23—**AniZona**, Box 67641, Phoenix AZ 85082. [anizona.org](http://anizona.org). Wigwam Resort, Litchfield Park AZ. Epcar. Anime.

21-24—**UK Nat'l Con**, c/o Scarlett, 8 Windmill Close, Epsom Surrey KT17 3AL, UK. [orbital2008.org](http://orbital2008.org). Near London.

27-30—**AggieCon**, Cepheid Var. (958460), Box 5688, College Station TX 77844. (979)268-3068. [aggiecon.tamu.edu](http://aggiecon.tamu.edu).

27-30—**World Horror Con**, Box 802, Layton UT 84041. [whc2008.org](http://whc2008.org). Radisson, Salt Lake City UT. Etchison, Palencar.

27-30—**EcumeniCon**, 18A S. Paula, Laurel MD 20707. (240) 786 5025. Baltimore MD. J. Lichtenberg. Spirituality.

28-30—**Ad Astra**, Box 7276, Toronto ON M5W 1X9. [ad-estra.org](http://ad-estra.org). General SF and fantasy convention.

28-30—**MidSouthCon**, Box 11446, Memphis TN 38111. [midsouthcon.org](http://midsouthcon.org). E. Flint, Ben Bova, Bob Eggleton, Glen Cook.

28—**Pulp AdventureCon**. (609) 346-4184. [boldventurepress.com](http://boldventurepress.com). Ramada, Bordentown NJ. Old pulp magazines.

## APRIL 2008

4-6—**ICon**, Box 550, Stony Brook NY 11790. [iconsf.org](http://iconsf.org). State U. of NY, Stony Brook NY. Harlan Ellison, B. Malzberg.

4-6—**OdysseyCon**, Box 7114, Madison WI 53707. (608) 260-9924. [oddcon.com](http://oddcon.com). Radisson. P. David, G.R.R. Martin.

4-6—**FILKONtario**, 145 Rice Ave. #98, Hamilton ON L9C 6R3. (905) 574-6212. [filkontario.ca](http://filkontario.ca). SF/fantasy folksinging.

4-6—**PortmeirCon**, 871 Clover Dr., N. Wales PA 19454. [portmeircon.com](http://portmeircon.com). Portmeirion UK. "The Prisoner" TV show.

25-27—**Nebula Awards**. [sfwa.org](http://sfwa.org). Driskill Hotel, Austin TX. SF and Fantasy Writers of America annual get-together.

25-27—**RavenCon**, 9623 Hollyburgh Terr., Charlotte NC 28215. [ravencon.com](http://ravencon.com). Richmond VA. Hickman, Strauss (mf).

25-27—**Malice Domestic**, Box 8007, Gaithersburg MD 20898. (301) 730-1675. Crystal Marriott, Arlington VA. Mysteries.

25-28—**CostumeCon**, 1875 S. Bascom Ave., #116-276, Campbell CA 95008. [cc26.info](http://cc26.info). San Jose CA. Costume fans.

## AUGUST 2008

6-10—**Dervention 3**, Box 1349, Denver CO 80201. [dervention3.org](http://dervention3.org). Bujold, Stembach, Whitmore. WorldCon. \$200.

## AUGUST 2009

6-10—**Anticipation**, CP 105, Montreal QE H4A 3P4. [anticipationsf.ca](http://anticipationsf.ca). Gaiman, Hartwell, Doherty. WorldCon. US\$150+.

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## ANNOUNCEMENTS

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**Alaska Writers Guild** call for entries for Ralph Williams Memorial Short Story Contest. Grand prize: \$5,000, division prizes of \$1,000, to be presented at 2008 Speculative Fiction Writers Conference, Anchorage, October 1-5, 2008. Two written critiques provided for each entry. Contest deadline: April 15, 2008. For guidelines and application, visit [www.alaskawritersguild.com](http://www.alaskawritersguild.com), or write to: 9138 Arlon Street, Suite A-3, Box 910, Anchorage AK 99507

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# NEXT ISSUE

## JUNE ISSUE

In our June issue, we feature the return of some of our most popular and honored authors, as well as a number of *Asimov's* debuts by writers whom we feel represent tomorrow's exciting SF talents. To start things off, we welcome back critically acclaimed and award-winning author **Ian R. MacLeod**, not seen in these pages since 2002's "Breathmoss," with his latest story: "The Hob Carpet." It's an epic, surprising, and transgressive tale of an innovative genius who must withstand the hardships caused by the controversial conclusions of his beliefs in a singularly conservative world. This is a beautifully imagined work, as readers have come to expect from MacLeod, and is sure to be one of the most talked-about stories of 2008.

## ALSO IN JUNE

The month continues with a happy tradition: that of **James Patrick Kelly's** annual June fiction offering (his 25th in a row—how does he do it?). This year he throws an unusual "Surprise Party" during which we see even tomorrow's augmented humans may still find making it "over the hill" a distinctly stressful experience. **Lawrence Person** brings us to the sunny seaside where a beach-bum discovers (and must figure out what to do about) the unfortunate, chilling affects of "Gabe's Globster"; up-and-coming experimental SF author **Forrest Aguirre** makes his *Asimov's* debut with "The Auctioneer and the Antiquarian, or, 1962," a touching story that reaches into one of US history's most uncertain moments to mirror the same uncertainty in a young boy's heart; **Felicity Shoulders** makes a strong *Asimov's* debut with a laugh-till-you-cry tale about the difficulties of single-motherhood while working as a "Burgerdroid"; perennial favorite **Nancy Kress** returns with a story of troubled teens presented with an even worse world than they'd imagined in "Call Back Yesterday"; and **Derek Künsken's** *Asimov's* debut, "Beneath Sunlit Shallows," dramatically displays his careful attention to world building and scientific extrapolation in a tale of three post-humans' lives in the deep blue sea.

## OUR EXCITING FEATURES

In his "Reflections" column, **Robert Silverberg** mourns "The Death of Gallium"; **James Patrick Kelly** sires the "Son of Gallimaufry" in his On the Net column; **Peter Heck** expounds "On Books"; plus an array of pleasant poetry by many of your favorite poets. Look for our giant April/May issue at your newsstand on March 4, 2008. Or you can subscribe to *Asimov's*—by mail or online, in varying formats, including downloadable forms, by going to our website, ([www.asimovs.com](http://www.asimovs.com))—and make sure that you don't miss any of the great stuff we have coming up!

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must join forces with  
the Klingons...and  
begin a hunt that  
will stretch from one  
generation to the next.



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